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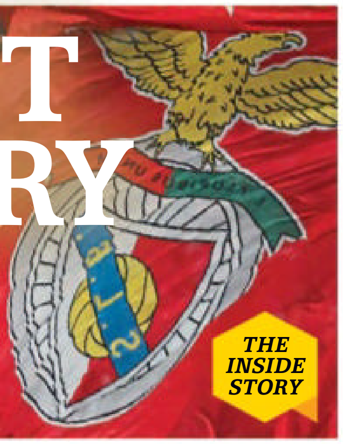

THE INSIDE STORY

BASQUE BOSSES

Special feature: *The breeding ground for a generation of talented young managers*

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MARTIN ODEGAARD

From teenage prodigy to leading Arsenal's Premier League title charge

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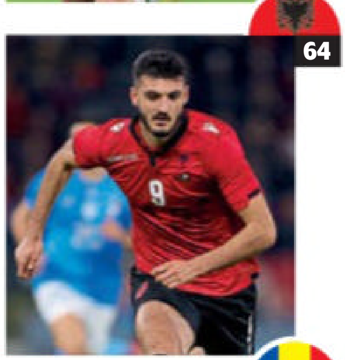

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The global game caught on camera

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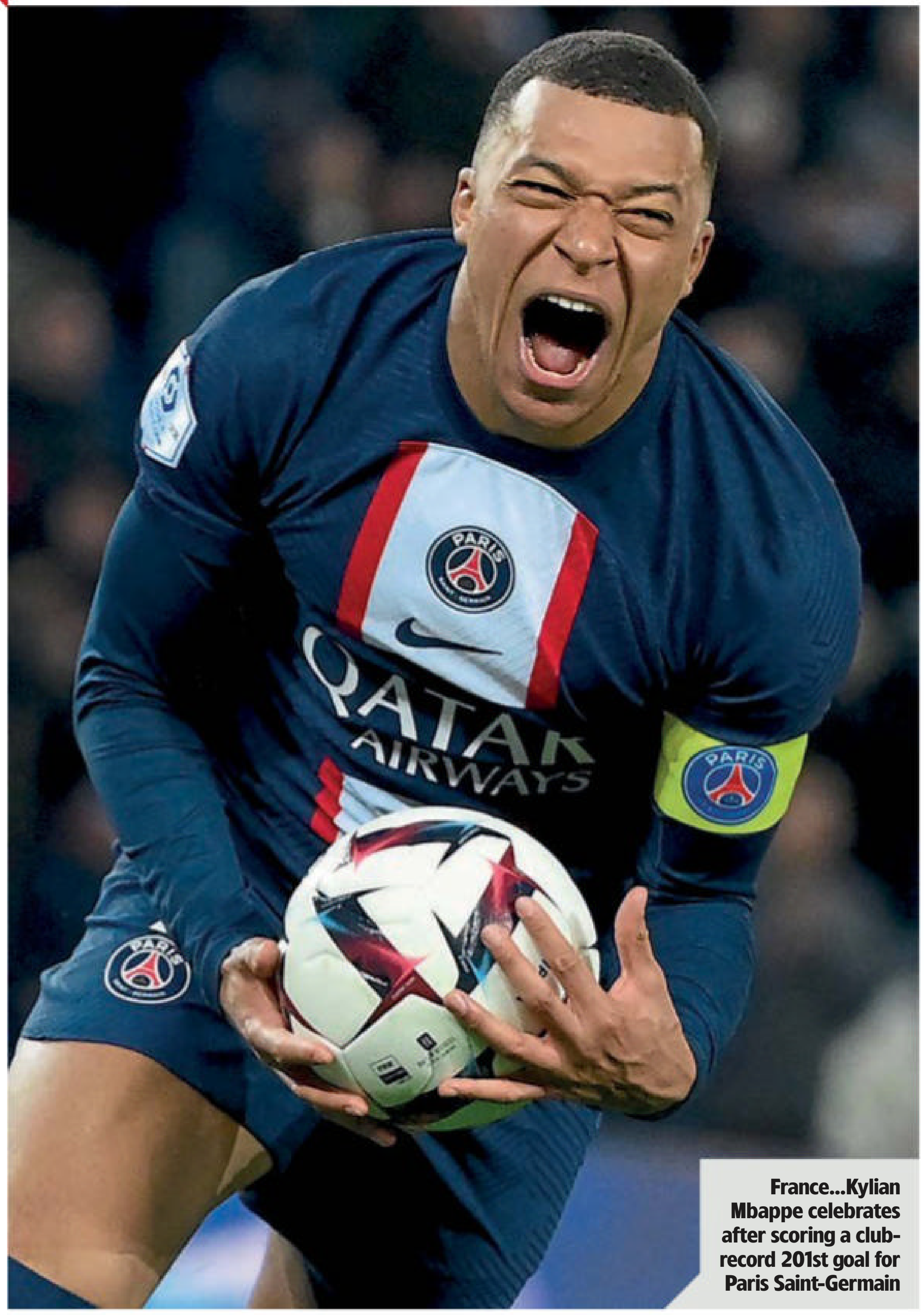
Argentina...Boca Juniors supporters cheer on their team ahead of the clash against Defensa y Justicia



France...Kylian Mbappe celebrates after scoring a club-record 201st goal for Paris Saint-Germain

Portugal...Porto winger Galeno loses his shorts during the Champions League clash against Internazionale

Italy...Napoli's Victor Osimhen attempts a bicycle kick v Atalanta

LIVERPOOL FC 7 18:17
MAN UNITED 0 90:00

England...the Anfield scoreboard during Liverpool's emphatic win over Manchester United

South Africa...Mamelodi Sundowns celebrate during their 5-2 win over Al Ahly in the CAF Champions League

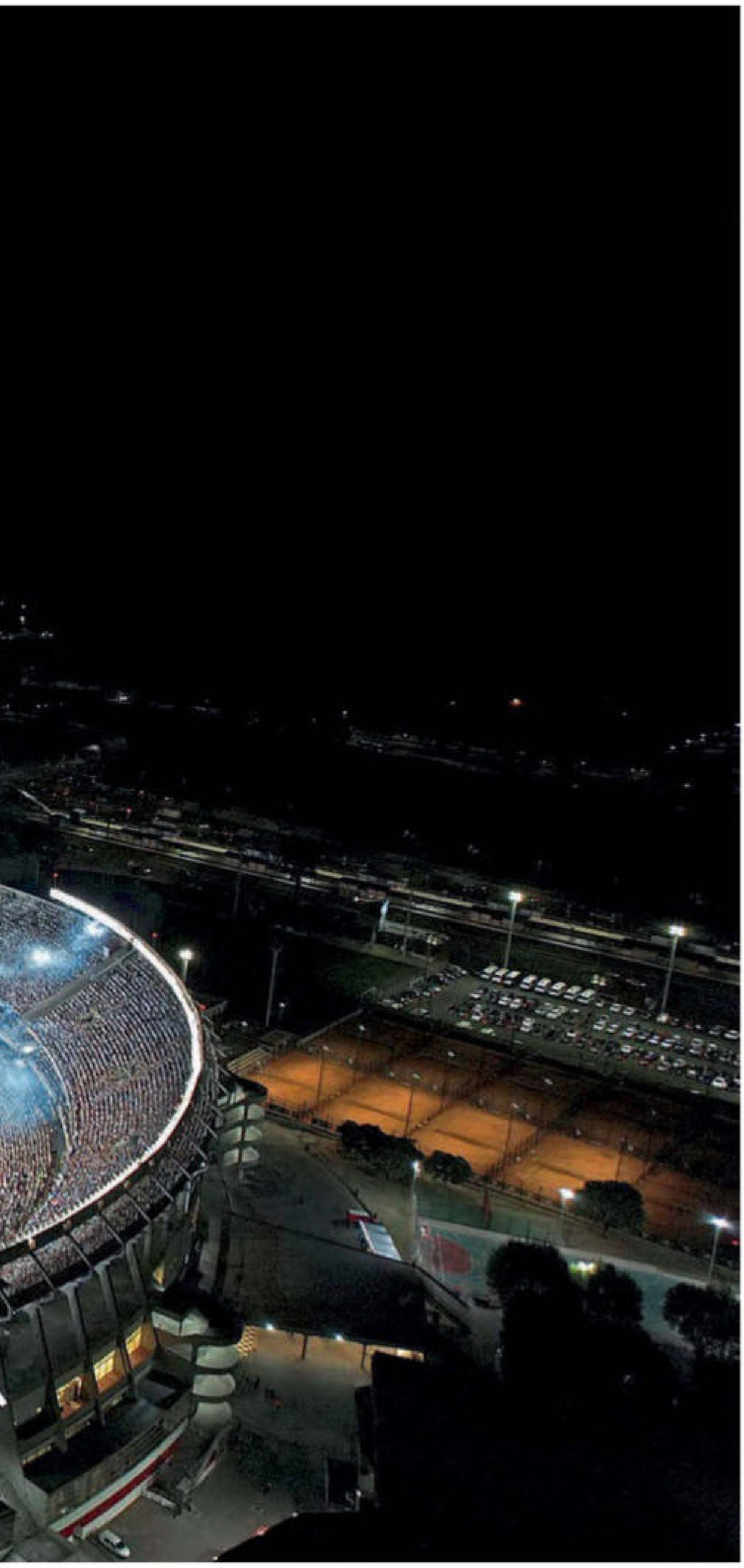
Spain...Barcelona stars celebrate Franck Kessie's stoppage-time winner against Real Madrid in the *Clasico*

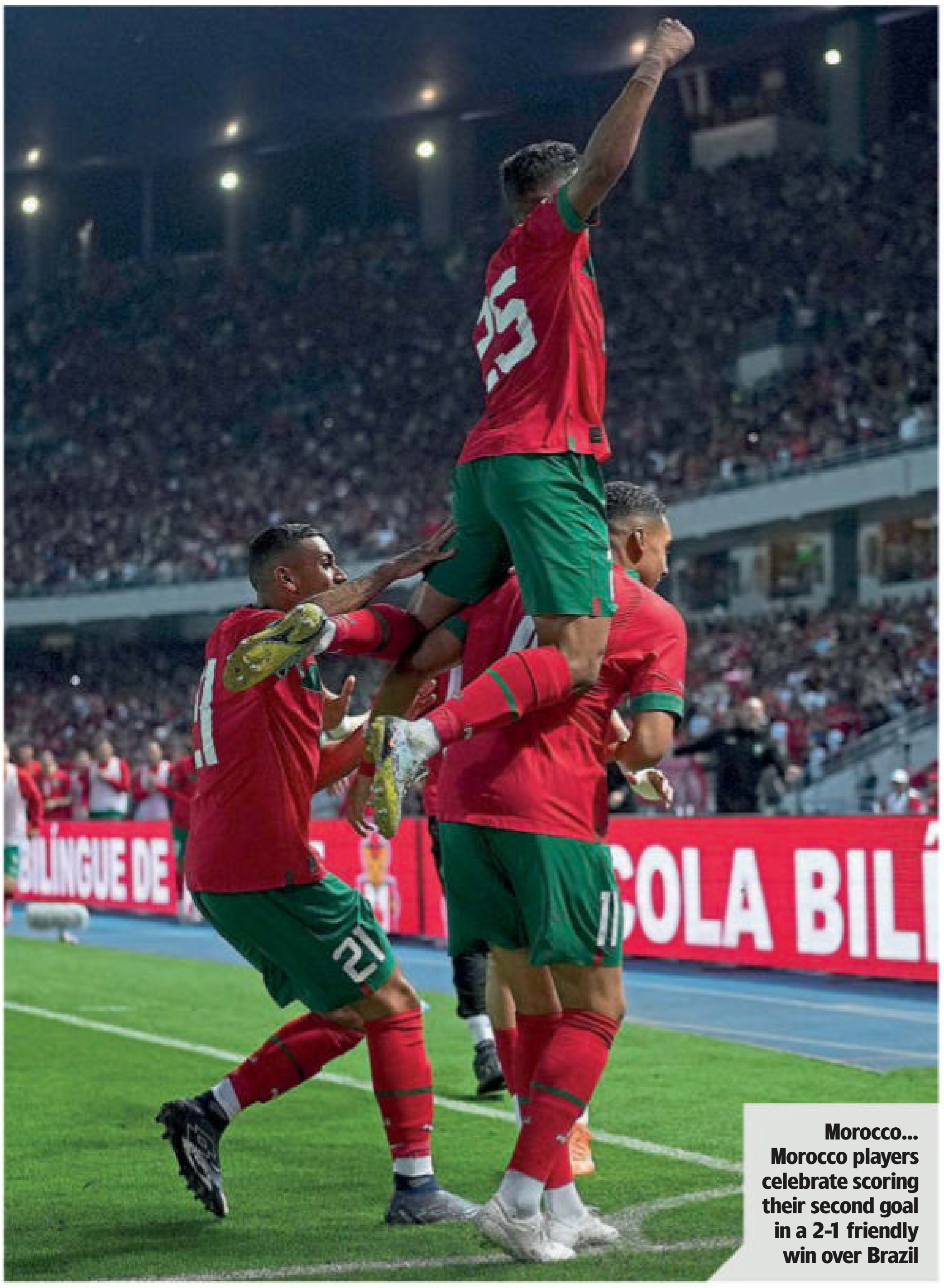
Mexico...Cesar Montes and Shamar Nicholson battle for the ball during Mexico and Jamaica's CONCACAF Nations League match

South Korea...Son Heung-min scores a free-kick for his country in a friendly against Colombia

Argentina...fireworks mark the homecoming of the national team and the World Cup trophy ahead of Argentina's first game since their triumph in Qatar

Sweden...Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Gibraltar's Lee Casciaro (not pictured) simultaneously become the oldest players in Euros qualifying history – both aged 41 years and 170+ days





Morocco... Morocco players celebrate scoring their second goal in a 2-1 friendly win over Brazil

Italy...Harry Kane celebrates after becoming England's all-time record scorer, surpassing Wayne Rooney's tally of 53 goals

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

It is not normal for a 24-year-old to be approaching a decade spent in the global public eye. Then again, Martin Odegaard is not a normal footballer. True, plenty of players have been hyped and heralded as teenagers, but few have experienced it to the same extent as the Norwegian. Fewer still have done so in the way that Odegaard did, exposed to the glare of social media spotlight like no prodigy before him. Before Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, a Stromsgodset academy player being known across Europe would have been unthinkable. Yet when he made his Norway debut as a 15-year-old in 2014, everyone already knew his name.

With such an immense burden of pressure at such a young age, it would have been easy for Odegaard to buckle, to become another of football's lost talents; he certainly would not be the first, and won't be the last. In this issue, we could just as easily be asking: "Whatever happened to that Norwegian *wunderkind*?" instead of praising him for captaining Arsenal to their best season in years.

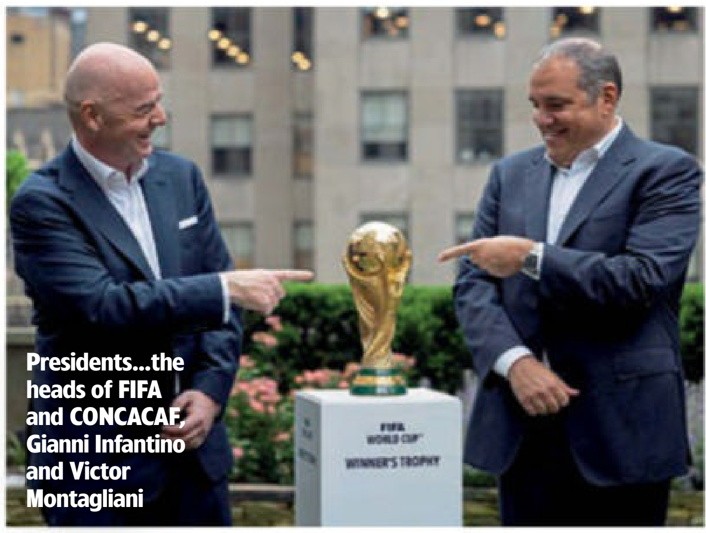
> We could just as easily be asking: "Whatever happened to that Norwegian *wunderkind*?" instead of praising him for captaining Arsenal to their best season in years

For the Gunners' Premier League title charge, Odegaard has perhaps been second in importance only to the manager, Mikel Arteta. The Spaniard's apprenticeship under Pep Guardiola at Manchester City is well documented, but his footballing education and passion for coaching goes much deeper. You could say it's in his blood; Arteta hails from a tiny corner of northern Spain that can claim to have nine of its natives currently coaching in Europe's top five leagues. We asked Sid Lowe to find out how Gipuzkoa, in the Basque Country, continues to produce such talented coaches.

Speaking of talented coaches, we've also profiled Roberto De Zerbi, the Italian guiding Brighton to unprecedented heights. The Seagulls are one of many sides hoping for big things as the season draws to an end and, in addition, we've tried to cover the most compelling in our annual round-up of the major talking points from Europe's top five leagues.

With stories from Ukraine, Brazil, Wales, Portugal, South Korea and India as well, there's plenty more to sink your teeth into this issue.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor



Presidents...the heads of FIFA and CONCACAF, Gianni Infantino and Victor Montagliani

FIFA

Over 100 matches to be played at 2026 World Cup

FIFA have announced that 104 matches will be played at the 2026 World Cup, 40 more than at Qatar in 2022 and 24 more than originally planned.

Initially the group stage of the tournament, which is to be co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico and will contain 48 teams for the first time, was to feature 16 groups of three teams with the top two progressing to the knockout stages. However, the success of the traditional format in Qatar convinced FIFA to change their plans, and 2026 will now begin with 12 groups of four teams, with the top eight third-placed teams joining the group winners and runners-up in a new round of 32.

The announcement was made at this year's FIFA congress in Rwanda, where it was also announced that plans for a 32-team Club World Cup had been approved. The first edition will take place in June 2025 and feature 12 European teams, six South American, four each from Asia, Africa and CONCACAF, and one from Oceania, with a final spot reserved for a team from the host country – likely to be Saudi Arabia.

The continental champions from each confederation for the years 2021 to 2024 will all qualify, with the exception of Oceania where the best-performing team over the four years will advance, while Europe and South America's remaining spots will be claimed by the highest-ranked sides according to the UEFA and CONMEBOL coefficients. So far, Chelsea, Real Madrid, Palmeiras, Flamengo, Al Hilal, Al Ahly, Wydad Casablanca, Monterrey and Seattle Sounders have all booked their places.

> "This joint bid…will bring together Africa and Europe, the northern and southern Mediterranean, and the African, Arab and Euro-Mediterranean worlds"

King Mohammed VI of Morocco announces that his country will join Spain and Portugal's bid to host the 2030 World Cup

SPAIN

Barcelona face corruption scandal

Barcelona face charges of corruption after allegations that the club paid Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira – a former vice-president of Spain's referees' committee – and a company he owns a reported €8.4 million.

In February, radio station *Ser Catalunya* revealed that, following an investigation into Negreira's tax affairs, Barcelona had made a series of payments to the former referee from 2001 until 2018 – the year that he ended his role with the referees' committee.

The public prosecutor's office stated that: "FC Barcelona obtained and maintained a strictly confidential verbal agreement with Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira so that, in his capacity as vice-president of the technical arbitral committee (CTA) and in exchange for money, the latter carries out actions tending to benefit FC Barcelona in decisions by the referees."

Barca president Joan Laporta responded by insisting the club is the "victim of a campaign" to "harm its honourability", while the club deny any wrongdoing insisting that Negreira only provided consultancy by compiling video reports on referees. However, the investigation stepped up when 18 out of the 20 La Liga clubs issued a statement expressing "deep concern". Real Madrid expressed their concern in a separate, later statement, with their position complicated by their pursuit of a European Super League, an interest that they share with Barca.

Launching its own investigation, UEFA said: "Inspectors have been appointed to conduct an investigation regarding a potential violation of UEFA's legal framework by FC Barcelona in connection with the so-called 'Caso Negreira'".

IFAB

VAR decision communications trials approved

IFAB have approved trialling the broadcasting of VAR decisions in-stadium and to live television audiences at FIFA tournaments.

The trial began at the 2022 Club World Cup in February, and will also be implemented at the 2023 Under-20 World Cup in May/June. If successful, the trial may be continued at other FIFA tournaments later this year.

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month…

Bowing out…Toby Alderweireld

127
Belgium caps won by Antwerp and ex-Tottenham Hotspur defender Toby Alderweireld, who retired from international duty in March.

40
Seconds that Moise Kean spent on the pitch in Juventus' visit to Roma, with the striker sent off almost immediately after being subbed on.

12
Games that Scott Parker took charge of Club Brugge before being sacked following the side's humiliating 7-1 aggregate defeat to Benfica in the Champions League.

5
Erling Haaland's five-goal showing against RB Leipzig in the Champions League saw him become only the third player to achieve the feat alongside Lionel Messi and Luiz Adriano.

536
Days that Wales midfielder David Brooks spent away from football following a Hodgkin lymphoma diagnosis, after he returned for Bournemouth in the Premier League in March.

2
Championship clubs that were handed transfer embargoes for submitting their accounts late: league leaders Burnley and strugglers Huddersfield Town.

19,618
Liverpool fans that will have their 2022 Champions League final tickets reimbursed after an independent report found that UEFA bears "primary responsibility" for the chaotic scenes outside the Stade de France.

15
Months that Jose Pekerman spent in charge of Venezuela after the veteran Argentine coach departed from the role in March.

2
Match officials found guilty of negligence in an Indonesian court after last year's stadium disaster that killed 135 people.

9.11
Seconds that it took Bournemouth midfielder Philip Billing to score against Arsenal – the second-fastest goal in Premier League history.

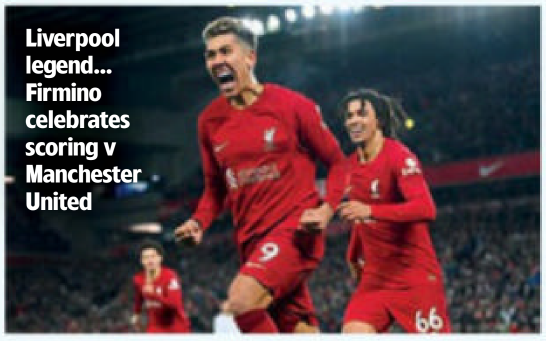
664
Career appearances for former Brazil midfielder Lucas Leiva, who was recently forced to retire because of a heart condition.

612
Atletico Madrid matches that Luis Aragones took charge of, a record that current coach Diego Simeone surpassed in March.

715
Days that Paris Saint-Germain had gone unbeaten at home in Ligue 1 before their shock 2-0 home defeat to Rennes in March.

75
Age of Roy Hodgson when he came out of retirement to take charge of Crystal Palace for the second time, replacing Patrick Vieira.

349
Matches played under Jurgen Klopp by Roberto Firmino, more than any other player. The Brazil striker will leave Liverpool when his contract expires this summer.



Liverpool legend…Firmino celebrates scoring v Manchester United

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Four more years

Elected unopposed ...Gianni Infantino

The president of FIFA is upset with us. Not with *World Soccer*, specifically, nor with this columnist, personally, but with the media, generally. We have Gianni Infantino, if not bewitched, then most certainly bothered and bewildered.

The 53-year-old Swiss lawyer is on record as a sensitive soul. On the eve of last year's World Cup finals in Qatar he portrayed himself as the personification of every downtrodden soul in this world. At least, downtrodden to the extent allowed by his reported £1.16 million annual pay packet.

Now Infantino has bared his soul again. This time it was within hours of being re-elected unopposed by acclamation for a second full four-year term in office.

Infantino launched into his press conference in anything but triumphal mood. He said: "I don't understand why some of you are so mean. I don't get it. The whole FIFA team works hard. We don't steal, we don't profit. Maybe I don't speak so much to the media. Maybe we don't leak so much and we need to be criticised. But we feel it's the right way to go.

"The other thing I don't understand is why, when some of you write or speak about FIFA, you say it's only about money, that FIFA is rich and when we propose a new competition it's a money-making exercise. We need the money, obviously, to make football grow and live all over the world but it's a bit tiring.

"Someone said FIFA is the Robin Hood of football, but we give not only to the rich we give to the poor to make them grow a little bit...You don't need to like me or love me, you can criticise me but please remain a bit factual."

Infantino wanted answers. So here goes...

FIFA'S FINANCES

Firstly, Infantino should not have been surprised by a perception that FIFA is money-mad after just spending a significant chunk of his congress address boasting about his wonderful job of enriching FIFA.

He had said: "We promised we were going to increase our revenues and regain the trust of sponsors and broadcasters. I was not sure we would achieve that because we set an ambitious target of $6.4bn but we did perform. Our revenues have gone up to a record $7.5bn, $1bn more than what was budgeted in a period beset by COVID.

"You cannot do this if you are not a strong organisation trusted by everyone. When I arrived the reserves were $1bn. Now they are at $4bn."

Not only that. He also derived great satisfaction from revolutionising the finances of this year's Women's

World Cup. He said: "The total money envelope will be over three times that of 2019 and ten times more than in 2015 so we will be moving to $150m in 2023."

Indeed, Infantino took such pleasure in FIFA's financial expansion on his watch that he suggested an eternal presidency, saying: "Before I was elected, each federation received $250,000 per year and now they receive $2m per year. If a CEO tells the stakeholders that their products were multiplied like this I believe they would keep that CEO forever."

If Infantino is upset by a media fixation on finances, then he has only himself to blame.

LEGITIMACY DOUBTS

Thirdly, he may not like it or even admit it but a perceptible cloud hangs over Infantino's presidency. Nothing major, just unfortunate events. Michel Platini believes Infantino had his eye on the top job even while the Frenchman was still president of UEFA and Infantino was his loyal general secretary.

It was a happy coincidence that when Platini was suspended, for calling in FIFA back pay, Europe's FAs turned to Infantino as a stand-in. What could he do but answer the call?

Since then Infantino's presidency has been haunted by Swiss legal distractions. Not that anyone expects them to come to anything; the Swiss judiciary that turned a blind eye to years of FIFA corruption is hardly going to nail Infantino over meetings he cannot remember with former attorney-general Michael Lauber, while Swiss prosecutors have already closed an investigation into his alleged use of a private jet.

Infantino has always vehemently attested his innocence. But it's out there and old media habits die hard.

MIDDLE EAST MISJUDGEMENTS

Infantino's insistence that money is no big deal contrasts sharply with his overt enthusiasm for Saudi Arabia.

Remember that Saudi-prompted biennial World Cup nonsense which Infantino embraced? Remember those "secret" talks about a $25bn bonanza from a Saudi-endorsed Club World Cup? Remember the possibility of contracting Visit Saudi as a staggeringly inappropriate sponsor for the Women's World Cup?

Infantino is a clever man, qualified lawyer, football business high-flyer. Astonishing that he has not learned the lessons of the human rights fuss with Qatar.

CLUMSY INFANTINO

Infantino has a tendency to put his foot in it, when perhaps his enthusiasm betrays his common sense.

Two examples: accusing Europe of "hypocrisy" and "racism" over its criticism of Qatar ahead of the World Cup was provocative, to say the least, then appearing to compare his original election campaign in 2016 with the recovery of the Rwandan people from the genocide of 1994 was as tasteless as it was insulting.

TAKING ON THE MEDIA

Finally, Infantino will know that press conference filibusters are insulting. Opening with a long, time-consuming personal diatribe leaves only a few minutes for questions and answers. Journalists (and employers footing their travel bills) resent that.

Infantino has a perfect right to his opinion of the media. But it might help if he understood media scepticism. It's good to talk.

> It would take Mother Teresa a couple of decades to clean up FIFA's image, never mind seven short years

FIFA'S IMAGE

Another reason for media scepticism is historical.

Some of us have been reporting on FIFA affairs since before Sepp Blatter even became general secretary in 1981, never mind president in 1998. We followed, down many years, all the trickery and skulduggery, the self-aggrandisement and illusory entitlement plus the greedy enrichment of a worldwide selection of FIFA grandees (not to mention some of their partners).

That ended not because of FIFA's own controls or the supine Swiss judicial system but thanks to the United States Department of Justice. Not that everyone within FIFA appreciated the FBI and IRS spoiling their little games.

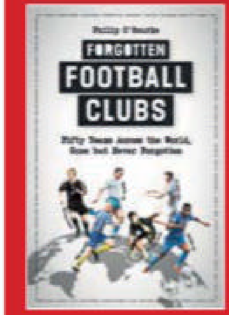
So Infantino, when talking up his "clean, new FIFA", should not kid himself that the specialist media has a short memory. He says his stakeholders now trust FIFA. Maybe. Maybe not. Rather they trust the protection provided by their own eagle-eyed lawyers.

It would take Mother Teresa a couple of decades to clean up FIFA's image, never mind seven short years.

nfantino
ral Secretary
Michel Platini
UEFA President

Former allies... Infantino and Michel Platini

BOOKS THIS MONTH



FORGOTTEN FOOTBALL CLUBS
By Philip O'Rourke (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

Forgotten Football Clubs uncovers clubs that have vanished, revealing their histories, their successes and their ultimate failures. Football brings joy to people across the world, evoking memories and nostalgia about past glories and events. When a football club folds, these are often all that is left. This book uncovers these very stories, from clubs founded in the 19th century to others lasting only a few years.

Scotland 42 England 1
An Englishman's Mazy Dribble Through Scottish Football
Mark Winter

SCOTLAND 42 ENGLAND 1
By Mark Winter (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Scotland 42 England 1 is an English OAP's light-hearted and affectionate look at Scottish football. Travelling all the way from Dover each time in an attempt to separate the myths from the facts, the author visits all 42 of Scotland's league clubs to watch a game, sample the hospitality (a hot pie and a strong drink) and climb the odd mountain. What he expects and what he finds are quite different.

Jonathan
WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

PSG's cult of celebrity undermines everything else

Walking out of Europe... Kylian Mbappe

Five times now in seven seasons, Paris Saint-Germain have gone out of the Champions League in the last 16. Over the past 12 years, they have spent in excess of £1.5 billion on transfer fees and their reward for that, aside from the French league titles that should essentially come as standard when you have that much money, has been to get beyond the quarter-finals of the Champions League twice. And what must be really galling is how the same pattern keeps on repeating.

Almost nothing in football is discrete. Everything connects. And much of what has gone wrong for PSG tactically over the past decade is a result of the ethos of the club. PSG are much, much richer than anybody else in France. When they fail to win the league, it is a massive failure. Most of the time, they win games with ease. Their famous forwards can indulge themselves. They are rarely challenged and so defensive organisation isn't prioritised: it matters far more whether a full-back can deliver a cross than whether he can dispossess a player running at him; it matters far more whether a centre-back can pass the ball than whether he can mark or win headers.

And without the case-hardening of regular competitive fixtures, they lose the capacity to fight. When things get tough, they don't really know how to respond. This is not limited to PSG, but a problem seen across Europe. Bayern Munich have suffered from it recently, as did Juventus, while for a side like Dinamo Zagreb – Croatian champions in 17 of the last 18 seasons – European and domestic football are so different they may as well be distinct sports.

> Much of what has gone wrong for PSG tactically over the past decade is a result of the ethos of the club

PSG's exits have often been the result of almost comical capitulations. Last season, against Real Madrid, they seemed in control of the tie only to be derailed as soon as the game at the Bernabeu began to turn against them (although Madrid had a habit of doing that to teams last season). This season's exit, to Bayern, felt almost perfunctory by comparison. The real pratfall had come in having to play Bayern in the last 16 at all.

In the group stage, PSG were unforgivably sloppy. They dominated the first half against Juventus, went 2-0 up, then switched off and in the end were under pressure as they won 2-1. In both games against Benfica, they went ahead only to be pegged back. Perhaps they thought beating Maccabi Haifa 7-2 was enough; having gone 2-1 up away to Juventus in their final group game they seemed content to run down the clock. And that opened the door to Benfica, who scored five times in the final 31 minutes in Haifa to pinch top spot in the group, casting PSG into the second pot. Perhaps it was slightly freakish, but at the same time it was a misfortune that could easily have been avoided.

Injuries played their part in the defeat, first restricting Kylian Mbappe to a substitute appearance in the first leg and then ruling Neymar out of

Same old story... Lionel Messi looks on as PSG bow out

the second altogether. The loss of defender Marquinhos and then his replacement Nordi Mukiele made a huge difference in the second. But then, if there's any side that shouldn't have personnel issues, it's one that's spent £1.5bn on players in the past 12 years.

Only PSG coach Christophe Galtier will know how he intended his 4-4-2 to perform in the first leg but, unless he had been seduced by the club's domination of games in Ligue 1, he surely didn't intend it to be so stretched. With an extra man in the middle, Bayern controlled possession for the first hour, although they seemed too surprised by their domination to take full advantage. The introduction of Mbappe and the switch to a 4-3-3 gave the initiative to PSG and Bayern looked rattled, a tight offside call ensuring they retained their 1-0 advantage.

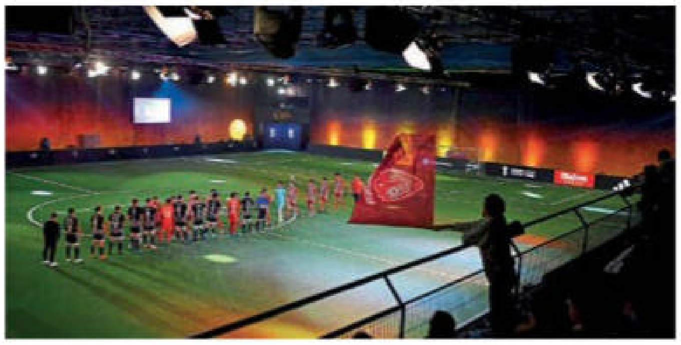
PSG looked better balanced with a back three and three central midfielders in the second leg, a formation only open to them because of the absence of Neymar. But they rarely threatened to hurt Bayern, their only two major chances a Sergio Ramos header from a corner and a Vitinha effort cleared off the line after Yann Sommer had gone dribbling in his own box. And when Bayern stepped up after the break, they had no response, the forward line, as so often before, dislocated from the midfield. They eventually went behind after a pass from the 17-year-old El Chadaille Bitshiabu put Marco Verratti under pressure.

It says much for PSG's chaotic squad building that they represent a city that is one of the world's great hotbeds of talent but have only three Parisians in their squad: two 17-year-olds and Mbappe, for whom they initially paid £140m and then a further £100m signing-on fee after he had run his contract down.

But then celebrity trumps all else at PSG. 4-4-2 or 3-5-2 are details: the culture of the club is its lust for glamour, and that is undermining everything else.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

After its absence for the past few issues, here are some of the best reports we couldn't make up from 2023 so far...



Kings League... inside the venue of Gerard Pique's competition

1 THE KINGS LEAGUE

Since retiring last year, Gerard Pique has been expanding his business interests, one of which is The Kings League: a seven-a-side football tournament involving YouTube personalities and ex-players, including Iker Casillas, Sergio Aguero and Ronaldinho – as well as one other mystery player. "Enigma", as he was pseudonymed, was confirmed by Pique to be a "La Liga footballer under the age of 30" and that he would "play wearing a Mexican wrestling mask to hide his face". Debates raged online as to Enigma's true identity, until one user spotted a neck tattoo that appeared to reveal ex-Cadiz striker Nano Mesa as the mystery player. A publicity stunt no doubt, but an effective one: the live stream of the game attracted as many as 900,000 viewers.

2 CRAZY CUP TALES

Manchester United's journey to this year's EFL Cup trophy threw up a number of bizarre stories, starting with their quarter-final win against Charlton Athletic. Addicks boss, Salford-born Dean Holden, is a season ticket holder at Old Trafford and, after watching his team exit the cup with a 3-0 defeat, he received an email from United inviting him to reserve his ticket for the semi-final, somewhat adding insult to injury. Meanwhile, on the other side of the draw, one Newcastle United fan got slightly carried away, getting a tattoo with the words: "NUFC Cup winners", before the Magpies' Wembley loss. One Newcastle player did benefit, though: keeper Martin Dubravka, who spent the first half of 2022-23 on loan at Old Trafford and played twice in the early rounds of the cup, picked up a winners' medal after Manchester United won the final 2-0.

3 EASY COME, EASY GO

Serie A managers have perhaps always had shorter shelf-lives than their counterparts in other European leagues, but Davide Nicola's time at Salernitana was especially chaotic. The 50-year-old was sacked twice in the space of 31 days; first being reinstated just two days after his initial departure, only to be fired again four games later. Nicola lost seven of his last ten games in charge, including a 8-2 defeat to Atalanta and 1-0 loss to relegation rivals Verona.

4 HITTING THE RIGHT NOTES

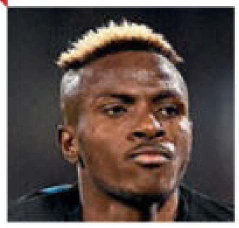
Specialised coaches have become a common sight in football in recent years, but Bayern Munich defender Dayot Upamecano's recruitment of a vocal coach is a new one to us. After struggling with sore throats after matches, the France centre-back addressed the problem by hiring an opera singer, who helped him to use his vocal chords more gently while also increasing his volume to improve his communication skills.

5 WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

There were bizarre scenes on the opening day of MLS, as new franchise St Louis City won their first-ever game in the competition thanks to a frankly ridiculous goal. They were trailing 2-1 to Austin FC with 78 minutes on the clock when Austin defender Kipp Keller lost his head, gifting the ball to City striker Jared Stroud inside the penalty box to tuck home. Keller could, arguably, be forgiven for the gaffe: he played for St Louis in their pre-MLS days, and was a team-mate of Stroud's at Austin until last November.

6 QUICK-THINKING KEEPER

Props to Feyenoord keeper Justin Bijlow for his quick thinking/dirty tricks during his side's clash against FC Twente. With his side 1-0 up, Bijlow was quick off his line to prevent a counter-attack, sliding in on Virgil Misidjan to concede a throw-in. Yet, with the goalkeeper now stranded up the pitch and Misidjan ready to take a quick throw-in, Bijlow quickly grabbed a spare ball from off the pitch and threw it back into play to stop the game. His subsequent yellow card was scant consolation for Twente, who would have had an empty goal to aim for.



“A lot of people worldwide consider the Premier league as the best and strongest league…I’m working so hard to make sure that I achieve my dream of playing in Premier League some day”

In-form Napoli striker Victor Osimhen hints at a future move to England

On the RADAR

Spotlight on the players and coaches making waves

Gabri VEIGA

(Celta Vigo)

At the time of writing, only club legend Iago Aspas has scored more La Liga goals for Celta Vigo this season than Veiga. The 20-year-old midfielder particularly caught the eye in late February when he scored two goals and assisted another in a 3-0 win over Real Valladolid, which heightened transfer speculation around him.

A product of Celta’s academy and a Spain Under-21 international, Veiga’s playing style bears a closer resemblance to Steven Gerrard or Frank Lampard than Andres Iniesta or Cesc Fabregas; his goals often come from late bursts into the penalty area or shots from outside the box, and he is not afraid to throw himself into a tackle.

Unsurprisingly, he has drawn plenty of interest from the Premier League. Arsenal, Manchester United and Newcastle United have all been credited with interest in the young midfielder, who has a reported €40 million buyout clause.

QR CORNER

In Italy’s fifth tier, Gioacchino Giardina scores one of the quickest goals ever for Sicilian side Mazarese against Nissa.

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

Liam MORRISON

(Bayern Munich)

The Scotland Under-21 centre-back, 19, who played in the academies of both Rangers and Celtic, recently penned a new deal at Bayern after impressing for the club’s reserves.

MYCAEL

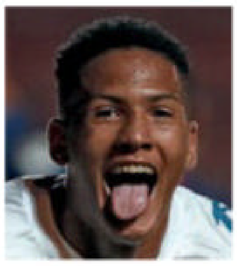
(Athletico Paranaense)

Man of the match in the final of Brazil’s South America Under-20 Championship victory, the 19-year-old goalkeeper was called up to the senior squad despite never playing a game for his club.

Dujuan RICHARDS

(Phoenix All Stars Academy)

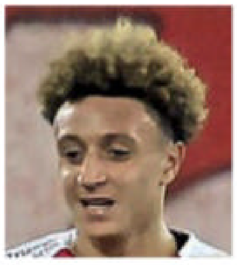
The Jamaican wonderkid, nicknamed “Whisper”, has agreed a deal to join Chelsea. The 17-year-old, who had also been linked with Newcastle United, will move to Stamford Bridge in November.



ANGELO Gabriel

(Santos)

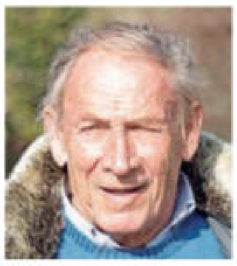
Santos’ second-youngster player of all time, having made his debut as a 15-year-old in 2020, was reportedly the subject of a bid from Nottingham Forest.



Eliesse BEN SEGHIR

(Monaco)

Since scoring twice on his debut against Auxerre in December, the 18-year-old forward has also notched match-winning assists against Paris Saint-Germain and Bayer Leverkusen.



Zdenek ZEMAN

(Pescara)

Now 75, the ex-Foggia, Lazio and Roma boss is back in the dugout in Serie C, taking charge of Pescara for the third time – 13 years after leading them out of Serie B with a side featuring Marco Verratti, Ciro Immobile and Lorenzo Insigne.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

FEBRUARY 2022

SEASON RANKINGS

Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

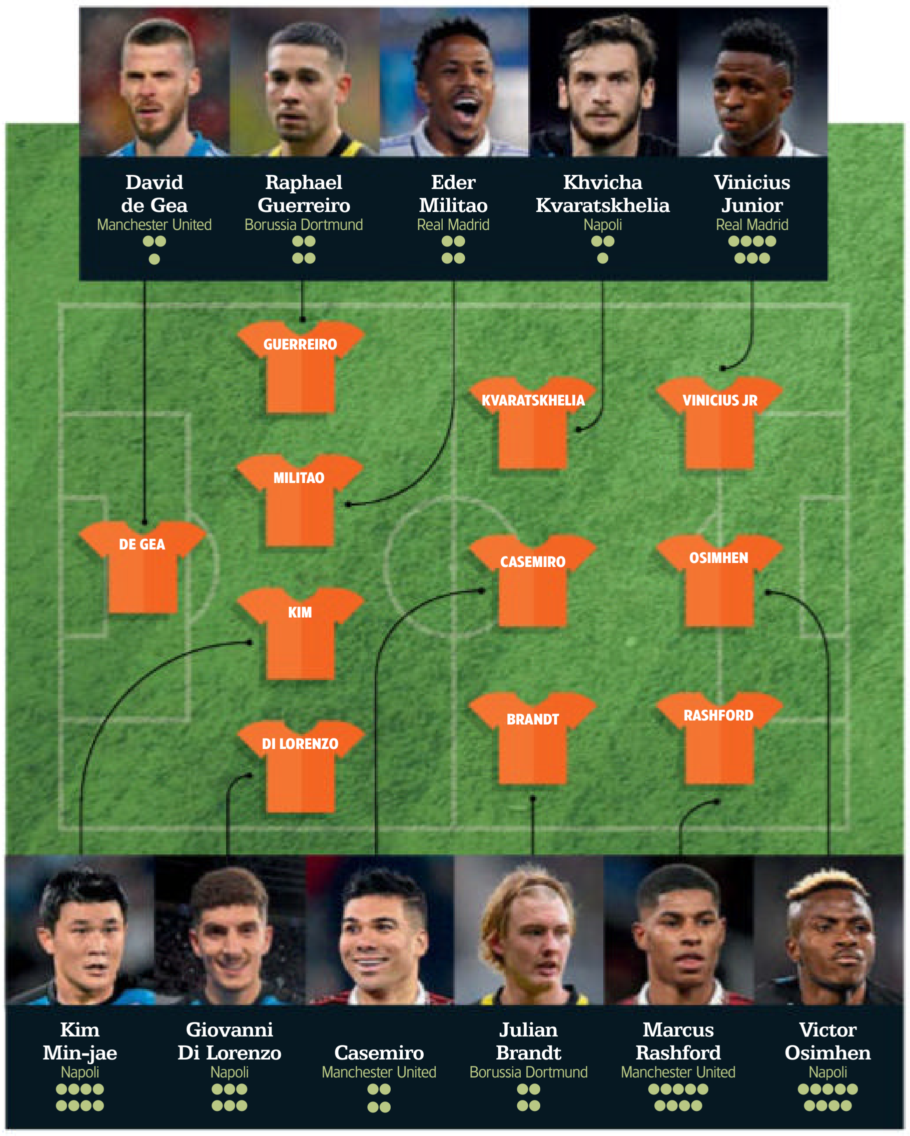
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	13
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	10
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	7
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	6
David de Gea (Manchester United)	5
Alex Meret (Napoli)	5
Yann Sommer (Bayern Munich)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	3
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Chelsea)	2
Diogo Costa (Porto)	2
Nick Pope (Newcastle United)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Ederson (Manchester City)	1
Rafal Gikiewicz (Augsburg)	1
Bernd Leno (Fulham)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Rui Patricio (Roma)	1
Frederik Ronnow (Union Berlin)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Ajax)	1
Brice Samba (Lens)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1

DEFENDERS

Kim Min-jae (Napoli)	24
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	15
Joao Cancelo (Bayern Munich)	12
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	12
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	12
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	10
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	10
Josko Gvardiol (RB Leipzig)	9
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	8
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	7
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	6
Danilho Doekhi (Union Berlin)	6
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	6
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	5
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	5
William Saliba (Arsenal)	5
Oleksandr Zinchenko (Arsenal)	5
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	4
Danilo (Juventus)	4
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Mario Rui (Napoli)	4
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Eric Dier (Tottenham)	3
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	3
Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United)	3
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	3
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	3
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	3
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Sven Botman (Newcastle United)	2
Matthijs de Ligt (Bayern Munich)	2
Sergino Dest (Milan)	2
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	2
Roger Ibanez (Roma)	2
Marquinhos (PSG)	2
Chancel Mbemba (Marseille)	2
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	2
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	2
Romain Saiss (Besiktas)	2
Fabian Schar (Newcastle United)	2
Nuno Tavares (Marseille)	2
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	2
Manuel Akanji (Manchester City)	1
Toby Alderweireld (Antwerp)	1
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	1
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	1
Rodrigo Becao (Udinese)	1
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Bremer (Juventus)	1
Dan Burn (Newcastle United)	1
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	1
Dante (Nice)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Bilbao)	1
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	1
Nico Elvedi (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Paul Jaeckel (Union Berlin)	1
Reece James (Chelsea)	1
Pierre Kalulu (Milan)	1
Kalidou Koulibaly (Chelsea)	1
Diogo Leite (Union Berlin)	1
Tyrell Malacia (Manchester United)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Bayern Munich)	1
Ben Mee (Brentford)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Cesar Montes (Espanyol)	1
Gonzalo Montiel (Sevilla)	1
Daniel Munoz (Genk)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Red Bull Salzburg)	1
Alfonso Pedraza (Villarreal)	1
Diego Rico (Real Sociedad)	1
Cristian Romero (Tottenham)	1
Emerson Royal (Tottenham)	1
Alex Sandro (Juventus)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Luke Shaw (Manchester United)	1
Antonio Silva (Benfica)	1
Leonardo Spinazzola (Roma)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Malick Thiaw (Milan)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Raphael Varane (Manchester United)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1
Aaron Wan-Bissaka (Manchester United)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	22
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	19
Pedri (Barcelona)	16
Casemiro (Manchester United)	14
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	13
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	11
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	9
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	9
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	9
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	9
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	7
Sofyan Amrabat (Fiorentina)	5
Gavi (Barcelona)	5
Julian Brandt (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	4
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	4
Granit Xhaka (Arsenal)	4
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	3
Przemyslaw Frankowski (Lens)	2
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham)	2
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	2
Joao Mario (Benfica)	2
Thomas Partey (Arsenal)	2
Rodri (Manchester City)	2
Marco Verratti (PSG)	2
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	2
Martin Zubimendi (Real Sociedad)	2
Leandro Barreiro (Mainz)	1
Benjamin Bourigeaud (Rennes)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Angel Di Maria (Juventus)	1
Brahim Diaz (Milan)	1
Christian Eriksen (Manchester United)	1
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	1
Jorginho (Arsenal)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Mohammed Kudus (Ajax)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Alexis Mac Allister (Brighton)	1
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Lazio)	1
Azzedine Ounahi (Marseille)	1
Roberto Pereyra (Udinese)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (RB Leipzig)	1
Thiago (Liverpool)	1
Vitinha (PSG)	1
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	1



FORWARDS

Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	43
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	27
Lionel Messi (PSG)	24
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	21
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	18
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	18
Marcus Rashford (Manchester United)	17
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	16
Neymar (PSG)	8
Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	6
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	4
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal)	3
Enner Valencia (Fenerbahce)	3
Sheraldo Becker (Union Berlin)	2
Kingsley Coman (Bayern Munich)	2
Ousmane Dembele (Barcelona)	2
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	2
Gabriel Jesus (Arsenal)	2
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Rafael Leao (Milan)	2
Sadio Mane (Bayern Munich)	2
Eddie Nketiah (Arsenal)	2
Cristiano Ronaldo (Al Nassr)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	2
Sofiane Boufal (Al Rayyan)	1
Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting (Bayern Munich)	1
Olivier Giroud (Milan)	1
Vincent Janssen (Antwerp)	1
Jesper Lindstrom (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	1
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Paul Onuachu (Southampton)	1
Lois Openda (Lens)	1
Dango Ouattara (Bournemouth)	1
Ivan Perisic (Tottenham)	1
Raphinha (Barcelona)	1
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Richarlison (Tottenham)	1
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Martin Terrier (Rennes)	1
Ivan Toney (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

eye witness

Tim Vickery reports

BRAZIL

Rollercoaster ride

The 2023 Brazilian national championship promises drama both on and off the pitch

"Big Three" members ...Atletico Mineiro

Contenders...South American champions Flamengo (left) and Brazilian champions Palmeiras (right)

Domestic Brazilian football is – and for the foreseeable future will continue to be – an export industry, its most promising youngsters syphoned off by European giants. But that does not condemn the Brazilian club game to perennial weakness. It still leaves plenty of talent at home, augmented by the addition of three types of player: veterans with successful European spells who are looking to round off their careers with a move back home, those in their mid-20s who have gone to Europe and, for whatever reason, not lived up to expectations, and those brought in from other South American countries.

There has been an increase in all three categories, as Brazil scouts the continent better than ever and as an influx of money makes the Brazilian clubs richer. The last three finals of the Copa Libertadores have been all-Brazilian affairs, and the gap that has opened up between Brazil and the rest of the continent is only going to grow. Brazilian clubs have become savvier, learning how to monetise their huge fan bases. There is more money flying around, especially as a result of developments in the gambling industry. And there is also a changing business structure in Brazil, with clubs now able to open their capital and have owners. This process, largely based on the Iberian model, is running into teething troubles. It entails a restructuring of debts, and it is unclear what should happen to creditors who decline to accept the terms on offer when the clubs are transformed into businesses (known as SAFs). Despite the legal uncertainties, foreign investors are being attracted, and more are likely to come.

That is because it would seem to be only a matter of time before Brazil's clubs form their own league. A short-lived effort in 1987 predated the Premier League by five years. Something more solid is now in the pipeline, although there are plenty of obstacles to overcome. The clubs are currently divided into two groups, each one backed by an investment fund. The main bone of contention at this stage is the split of TV money. What should be the difference between the club that gets the most and the one receiving the least? Agreeing on a common good is seldom easy in Brazil, though this time there should be enough money on the table to bring heads together. But lurking in the background is an even more complicated subject, one vital to the development of the game in a country

> It would seem to be only a matter of time before Brazil's clubs form their own league

Last year's runners-up... Internacional

of continental dimensions: the calendar.

Brazilian football is held back, and forced out of sync with everyone else, by the continued existence of the State Championships – one for each of the 27 states – held in the first few months of the year. The logical thing to do would be to scrap them in their current form, reorganising them in a way that gives the small clubs a

BRAZILIAN SERIE A 2023

AMERICA MINEIRO
Coach: Vagner Mancini State: Minas Gerais
Traditional but modest Belo Horizonte club who have put together two solid top-flight seasons since their promotion in 2020, and even made their Libertadores debut last year. Only Atletico Mineiro and Cruzeiro have won more Minas Gerais regional state championships.

ATHLETICO PARANAENSE
Coach: Paulo Turra State: Parana
Brazilian champions in 2001, last year's Copa Libertadores runners-up are an ambitious, well-run outfit who consistently punch well above their weight. The new coach also represents continuity: Turra was assistant to Luiz Felipe Scolari, who has moved upstairs. Cup specialists.

ATLETICO MINEIRO
Coach: Eduardo Coudet State: Minas Gerais
Double winners in 2021 who fell back last year but now hope to fire on all cylinders. They have brought in a top-class Argentine coach and will inaugurate their new stadium. The pressure is on to celebrate with silverware.

BAHIA
Coach: Renato Paiva State: Bahia
Two-time champions (1959, 1988) and regional giants in for interesting times after winning promotion and then becoming part of the City Football Group. Plenty of players are coming in, but early results have been poor and the new Portuguese coach is under pressure.

BOTAFOGO
Coach: Luis Castro State: Rio de Janeiro
The second season with the business model may not be easy, with owner John Textor appearing to have doubts. Backed by good scouting, the two-time Brazilian champions' recruitment model worked well last year, and the Copa Sudamericana campaign is eagerly awaited.

CORINTHIANS
Coach: Fernando Lazaro State: Sao Paulo
Giant club (seven national and 30 regional titles) working its way back from financial problems and now entrusted to a young coach, son of a former idol. Showing interesting midfield fluidity, but much may depend on the fragile fitness of wonderful playmaker Renato Augusto.

CORITIBA
Coach: Antonio Oliveira State: Parana
Yo-yo club who were caught up in last year's relegation dogfight but, with extra capital of their new business model, now have their sights set higher. Their young Portuguese coach is now with his third Brazilian club. Record winners of the Campeonato Paranaense.

CRUZEIRO
Coach: Pepa State: Minas Gerais
Shaken off financial implosion and back in the top flight under the administration of former great Ronaldo, who has applied a cut-price model that worked well in the second division. Ex-coach Paulo Pezzolano implemented a high-energy, high-press game – will Pepa do the same?

CUIABA
Coach: Ivo Vieira State: Mato Grosso
New club (founded in 2001) who became the region's first top-flight representative for decades, and now embark on a third campaign in the first division. Survival is the objective for their new Portuguese coach in his first South American adventure.

FLAMENGO
Coach: Vitor Pereira State: Rio de Janeiro
Libertadores and domestic cup champions, but still in the shadow of the 2019 side. Unstoppable on their day, but balancing the front four with the defence has been a problem for a number of coaches, and a poor start to 2023 has the new Portuguese boss under pressure.

year-long fixture list without over-burdening the big clubs. But that is not the way that Sao Paulo sees things.

In Brazil's challenging geography, the city of Sao Paulo has the fortune to be backed by a plateau rather than mountains, facilitating development. It has a number of wealthy cities. This state, then, is the only one where a local championship makes sense. Sao Paulo sees this as a competitive advantage, which it is very keen to retain. And so for the moment the issue of organising an improved calendar is not even on the table. It is a football that has been kicked down the road to be addressed later, once other thorny topics have been agreed.

There is, then, plenty of drama ahead behind the scenes in Brazilian football – and there should be plenty of drama coming up on the pitch between April 15 and December 3. The field looks very deep. The four promoted teams – Cruzeiro, Gremio, Bahia and Vasco da Gama – are all giants, far bigger clubs than the quartet that went down. Only five of the 20 teams have never won the league title: Cuiaba, Goias, America Mineiro, Red Bull Bragantino and Fortaleza.

Brazil's "most interesting coach" ...Fluminense boss Fernando Diniz

The line-up remains heavily skewed towards the traditional heartlands of the Brazilian game, with the South East region providing 12 teams and four more coming from the South, leaving just four slots for the rest of the country. The North East has two representatives, with one each from the Centre and the Centre-West. And the idea that the title might leave the heartlands is all but unthinkable.

Three teams start the competition as favourites: reigning league champions Palmeiras, current South American champions Flamengo and Atletico Mineiro, double winners in 2021 who fell away last year but now trust that they have found the path back to glory. Gaps have opened up, and the days have gone when the league was thought of as a competition where

> Three teams start the competition as favourites: reigning league champions Palmeiras, current South American champions Flamengo and Atletico Mineiro, double winners in 2021

Top-flight return ...Cruzeiro are back after being relegated in 2019

at least 12 sides would kick off with more or less an equal chance of being crowned champions. Others may hope to play themselves into contention – a resurgent Corinthians, perhaps, or just maybe Sao Paulo, the fascinating Fluminense, the Porto Alegre duo of Internacional and newly-promoted Gremio, or the forward-thinking Athletico Paranaense. But all start off behind the clubs which in recent years have been Brazil's "Big Three".

This year, with the exception of the Under-20 World Cup in late May and June, there is no international competition during the season to muddy the waters. Even so, the schedule is so crowded, with so much travelling to be done, that teams are usually forced to prioritise. It helps that six clubs qualify for next year's Copa Libertadores – a number that will rise if a Brazilian club becomes continental champion or claims the Copa Sudamericana. Sometimes, then, clubs are content to settle for a Libertadores slot while bringing all their fire to bear on a quest to win the domestic cup, with its high prestige and massive prize money. This can make the league hard to predict because, as aims and priorities are adjusted, there will surely be teams resting their stars and fielding reserve sides during the course of the competition.

The recent trend towards foreign coaches has continued. Ahead of the start of the season, precisely half the teams were being coached by a non-Brazilian. Eight of the foreigners were Portuguese, with two from Argentina. These numbers are, of course, subject to change. The State Championships have little sporting merit, but serve to get plenty of coaches the sack as their early season efforts are found wanting. It is common to have a flurry of coaching changes in the build up to the big kick-off – a bizarre way to prepare for a league campaign that will extend for almost seven months.

And this year there is the added complication of high expectations. Over the last few decades Brazilian club football has transformed itself from a sport organised around the local to one where the focus is now national, and continental. This shift does not leave enough serious titles lying around for all of the clubs to maintain the status they are so proud of. With 15 former champions in the field, many of them fortified by new money, it is simply not mathematically possible for everyone's expectations to be met. For some traditional giants, 2023 is going to be a bumpy ride.

Campeonato Brasileiro bow...Uruguay legend Luis Suarez will spearhead Gremio's top-flight return

FLUMINENSE
***Coach:* Fernando Diniz *State:* Rio de Janeiro**
2022 was a triumph for perhaps the country's most interesting coach, committed to a model of anarchic attack that will surely be bolstered by the return of Marcelo. They are defensively vulnerable and might have sold one winger too many, but they will be fun to watch.

FORTALEZA
***Coach:* Juan Pablo Vojvoda *State:* Ceara**
A huge recent success story, largely due to the magnificent work of their in-demand Argentine coach. The amount of travelling is especially gruelling for a North East club, and after a scare in the first half of last season this time the signings have come early. Big rivals Ceara were relegated last season meaning no *Classico-Rei* this term.

GOIAS
***Coach:* Guto Ferreira *State:* Goias**
Yo-yo provincial club who on last year's return to the top flight avoided the relegation dogfight – unlike rivals Atletico Goianiense. More of the same and a cup run would be highly acceptable, though the task is complicated by the loss of centre-forward Pedro Raul to Vasco da Gama.

GREMIO
***Coach:* Renato Portaluppi *State:* Rio Grande do Sul**
Bounced straight back from their shock relegation in 2021 and could make a big impact, galvanised by a charismatic coach, the arrival of Luis Suarez and options on the wing and in attacking midfield. Will aim for a Copa Libertadores place, a tournament they've won three times.

INTERNACIONAL
***Coach:* Mano Menezes *State:* Rio Grande do Sul**
The three-time national champions (all in the 1970s) finished a surprise second last year, though they were never in serious contention for the title, and a cup run would seem to be their best chance of silverware this season. Coached by a former Brazil national team boss.

PALMEIRAS
***Coach:* Abel Ferreira *State:* Sao Paulo**
Reigning champions, record 11-time winners and the team to beat, largely because of their outstanding Portuguese coach. Skilled at developing individuals, Ferreira is a specialist in organising teams that are not easy on the eye but grimly efficient in the big games. The only doubt is whether the squad is deep enough.

RED BULL BRAGANTINO
***Coach:* Pedro Caixinha *State:* Sao Paulo**
Promoted to the top flight in 2019, were Copa Sudamericana finalists in 2021, but now a much-travelled Portuguese coach has been brought in to breathe life into an apparently flagging project. The club's business model was once ahead of the curve. Has it now been overtaken?

SANTOS
***Coach:* Odair Hellman *State:* Sao Paulo**
Representing a city of under half-a-million, Pele's old club are a long-running miracle, sustained in recent times by its fine youth development. But, caught between past glories (eight national titles and 22 Paulista crowns) and present day difficulties, the storm clouds are gathering.

SAO PAULO
***Coach:* Rogerio Ceni *State:* Sao Paulo**
Have kept faith with the club idol coach despite a desperately disappointing 2022. New signings would seem to have given the six-time champions more defensive solidity and extra dribbling options up front. Another failure to qualify for the Libertadores would be a disaster.

VASCO DA GAMA
***Coach:* Mauricio Barbieri *State:* Rio de Janeiro**
Back in the top flight after two years in Serie B with the hope that, now backed by US capital, they are here to stay and in the hunt for honours. They have a productive academy, money for new signings, and a progressive young coach to put the parts together.

E PLURIBUS UNUM
S.L.B.
PEACE

Talent factory
...Benfica

eye witness

Tom Kundert reports

PORTUGAL

Benfica's transfer market mastery

In the 1960s Benfica were a match for anyone, reaching six European Cup finals in the decade and winning two of them. Nowadays the Lisbon giants struggle to consistently compete in the Champions League. But in one aspect of modern football, the Portuguese club can still claim to be in the absolute elite. When it comes to working the transfer market, Benfica have an enviable record. Since the turn of the century, an astonishing €1.39bn in transfer fees have flowed into the coffers of the Estadio da Luz, a sum only surpassed by Juventus.

While Benfica supporters would much rather they could boast about a team that did justice to their glorious past, it is precisely the modest position the club occupies in today's football food chain that has created the perfect conditions for what has become a phenomenal money-making operation.

Several factors make Portugal an ideal incubator for supremely talented young players. The Portuguese league is extremely competitive at the top, especially when it comes to the ferocious head-to-heads between perennial title rivals Benfica and Porto, and an often-fiery Lisbon derby pitting Benfica against Sporting. But it is also a highly asymmetrical league, in which the best are miles ahead of the rest. In the majority of matches Benfica will eventually overcome their opponents with a greater or lesser degree of difficulty. Academy products and talented young imports can be given plenty of playing time to smooth out the rough edges without compromising the quest for silverware. Mistakes can be made without proving disastrous.

At the same time, these gifted players busy learning their trade can test themselves in the pressure-cooker environments of the huge domestic clashes, and also at the very pinnacle of the game given that Champions League qualification is all but guaranteed every season. The combination of exposure to elite-level football and abundant playing time is crucial for the development of a young player. It is a luxury often deprived of their European counterparts in the same age bracket in higher profile leagues, where every game feels like a win-at-all-costs match, and managers are reticent to blood youngsters.

While the top European clubs have largely caught up with the outstanding scouting networks that Portuguese clubs have had in place in South America for decades, this ability to offer a fast-tracked route to first-team football and the Champions League is an enticing calling card for the agents of high-potential players whose clients are sought-after commodities. It has become commonplace for Brazilian or Argentine youngsters to openly express their joy at signing for Benfica – not because of the prestige attached to the institution, but because it offers the perfect next step on a well-trodden pathway to the very top in club football.

Enzo Fernandez was far from an unknown quantity when he signed for Benfica in the summer of 2022. His decision to come to Portugal was no doubt influenced by the draw of immediate Champions League football as an integral part of the team, whereas a move to one of England, Spain or Italy's biggest clubs would almost certainly have seen him, at least initially, some way down the pecking order in bloated squads.

> "He showed himself to be a player who was not committed to Benfica. It is not by banging your chest and pointing to the badge that you show your commitment. Anybody can do that"
>
> **Benfica president Rui Costa on Enzo Fernandez**

Likewise, from Benfica's point of view, the Champions League provides the best possible shop window to showcase their prime talents. Darwin Nunez would not have been sold for four times the fee he had been bought for two years previously had he not put in impressive performances and scored goals against Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Liverpool.

Another factor that should not be overlooked is Benfica's bargaining power. Well over a decade of holding out for ever upwardly spiralling transfer

Premier League profits...Darwin Nunez and Enzo Fernandez both moved to England for enormous fees

fees, ably aided by Portuguese super-agent Jorge Mendes, has given the club a perfect notion of the value of the assets they are nurturing. While some players have failed to live up to their price tag, Benfica can point to the likes of Angel Di Maria, Ederson, Bernardo Silva and Ruben Dias to persuade buying clubs that they are acquiring authentic world-beaters.

Yet a state of affairs in which apparently everyone comes out a winner – club, player, agent – does have its drawbacks. Benfica supporters have been increasingly venting their frustration at the club's inability to build a team that can compete for international silverware. While aware of their lack of financial muscle compared to the super clubs, they argue that the sheer number of multi-million-euro sales in recent years (see table) combined with the impressive conveyor belt of academy talent should have provided the resources for a stronger showing in the Champions League.

Legendary Benfica and Portugal playmaker Rui Costa ascended to the presidency of the club a little over a year ago and he has intimated there will be a shift in strategy. Previous president Luis Filipe Vieira was accused of milking the transfer market instead of constructing a team that could truly compete in Europe. When he was ousted, Costa took over and promised to prioritise Benfica's football project, retaining players rather than chasing the big bucks.

Even accounting for a certain dose of political posturing, it was enlightening to hear Rui Costa's interview the day after Enzo Fernandez had been sold to Chelsea. The president explained that he had offered Enzo the chance to stay at Benfica for the rest of the season and then move to London in the summer, in a deal where Benfica would receive substantially less while the Argentine would not lose one cent. Fernandez refused.

"It was at that moment that I decided he had to go," said a furious Rui Costa. "He showed himself to be a player who was not committed to Benfica. It is not by banging your chest and pointing to the badge that you show your commitment. Anybody can do that."

Benfica have impressed in the Champions League in 2022-23 – topping a group that included PSG and Juventus, and booking their place in the quarter-finals after demolishing Club Brugge in the last 16 – and Rui Costa has a burning desire to regularly compete at the top table. This would entail Benfica keeping their best players in the Portuguese capital for longer than what has become the norm. The cold economics of modern football, however, suggests it is unrealistic to expect an end to the huge sales any time soon.

BENFICA'S BIGGEST-EVER SALES

2019	**Joao Felix** *(Atletico Madrid)*	**€126m**
2023	**Enzo Fernandez** *(Chelsea)*	**€121m**
2022	**Darwin Nunez** *(Liverpool)*	**€75m**
2020	**Ruben Dias** *(Manchester City)*	**€68m**
2012	**Axel Witsel** *(Zenit St. Petersburg)*	**€40m**
2017	**Ederson** *(Manchester City)*	**€40m**
2019	**Raul Jimenez** *(Wolves)*	**€38m**
2017	**Nelson Semedo** *(Barcelona)*	**€35.7m**
2016	**Renato Sanches** *(Bayern Munich)*	**€35m**
2017	**Victor Lindelof** *(Manchester United)*	**€35m**
2010	**Angel Di Maria** *(Real Madrid)*	**€33m**
2011	**Fabio Coentrao** *(Real Madrid)*	**€30m**
2015	**Rodrigo** *(Valencia)*	**€30m**
2017	**Goncalo Guedes** *(PSG)*	**€30m**
2011	**David Luiz** *(Chelsea)*	**€25m**
2014	**Nemanja Matic** *(Chelsea)*	**€25m**
2015	**Enzo Perez** *(Valencia)*	**€25m**
2014	**Lazar Markovic** *(Liverpool)*	**€25m**
2016	**Nicolas Gaitan** *(Atletico Madrid)*	**€25m**
2020	**Raul De Tomas** *(Espanyol)*	**€22.5m**

Club president ...Rui Costa

WHO COULD BE NEXT?

Emirates
FLY BETTER

▲ GONCALO RAMOS
The 21-year-old striker, who hit a hat-trick at the World Cup on his full debut for Portugal, has been scoring goals for fun this season (seven in the Champions League including qualifiers) and is reportedly a transfer target for a number of big clubs, led by Newcastle United.

Emirates
FLY BETTER

▲ FLORENTINO LUIS
After a brilliant title-winning debut season under Bruno Lage in 2018-19, the combative midfielder struggled to live up to his early promise. After unsuccessful loans at Monaco and Getafe, the 23-year-old has rediscovered his best form under Roger Schmidt.

Emirates
FLY BETTER

▲ ANTONIO SILVA
The teenage centre-back only broke into the first team due to injuries, but grabbed his opportunity with some assured displays that belied his tender years, becoming a mainstay of Benfica's back line and even making Portugal's 2022 World Cup squad.

Emirates
FLY BETTER

▲ ANDREAS SCHJELDERUP
At the time of writing the highly-rated 18-year-old Norwegian wonderkid, signed in January from Nordsjaelland, was yet to make his Benfica debut. But all the noise surrounding the free-scoring midfielder suggest this could be another classic "buy raw, develop, sell big" operation.

eye witness

James Kelly reports

WALES

It’s always sunny in Wrexham

The time is just before 11pm. It is a cold night in Sheffield, the sort where clouds of condensation emanate from the breath of waiting travellers at the main train station before rising into the darkness.

As a train pulls into platform five and grinds to a halt, the vacant carriages are boarded by waiting Wrexham supporters. They embark ready for a one-hour journey to Manchester having just seen their side lose 3-1 at Bramall Lane in the fourth round of the FA Cup.

As the train pulls out the station, four adolescents sat at a table, each clutching a can of Fosters, start up a chant:

“Less than a mile from the centre of town, a famous old stadium crumbling down. No-one’s invested so much as a penny, bring on the Deadpool *and Rob McElhenney.”*

Taken from local band Declan Swans’ song “It’s Always Sunny In Wrexham”, the chorus has been adopted by Wrexham fans since the club were taken over in February 2021 by American actor McElhenney and his Canadian business partner Ryan Reynolds. A tongue-in-cheek song, it has become the soundtrack for the revival of the club.

Nearly 5,000 Wrexham supporters made the journey across the Pennines

macron
Expedia
IFOR WILLIAMS TRAILERS
ADVANCE

for the Sheffield United replay, watching their side in that stage of the competition for the first time since the 1999-2000 season. Having witnessed a pulsating first match at the Racecourse Ground nine days earlier – ending in a 3-3 draw thanks to John Egan's header in the fifth minute of stoppage time – the visitors were in dreamland in the replay when their side were handed the chance to take a 2-1 lead from the penalty spot in the 72nd minute.

Yet after Adam Davies had saved Paul Mullin's spot-kick, the hosts went on to progress thanks to late goals by Billy Sharp and Sander Berge.

While it was not to be for Wrexham, the two dramatic cup ties – both aired on national television – brought the non-league Welsh side live into homes across the UK. Combined with the Disney+ documentary *Welcome to Wrexham,* the entire nation is now aware of the journey the club are currently on.

For the first time in many, many years, there is a level of expectation around Wrexham. Starting the National League season as odds-on title favourites, the Red Dragons are expected to win virtually every game. Scoring 100 league goals before the end of March and remaining unbeaten at home in all competitions, they have more than lived up to the hype.

Given the personnel involved, it is unsurprising. Wrexham are managed by Phil Parkinson, a man who has taken charge of over 600 Football League matches with the likes of Hull City, Charlton Athletic, Bolton Wanderers and Sunderland. His CV includes three promotions, including taking Colchester United to the Championship in 2006. "Parky" also has a reputation for being a cup specialist, the highlight being taking League Two Bradford City to the League Cup final in 2013.

Working with a budget that is often bigger than clubs higher up the pyramid, Parkinson has built a squad packed with Football League experience. Anthony Forde, Ben Tozer, Eoghan O'Connell, Ollie Palmer and Tom O'Connor all arrived from clubs in League One, while midfielders Andy Cannon (Hull) and Elliot Lee (Luton Town) both left the Championship for non-league.

Of all the new faces, supporters have particularly taken to Mullin. Last October, the striker made national headlines after posting a photo on social media of his boots, which had the words "F*** the Tories" stitched in – a slogan that is now chanted at most games. The club were forced to distance themselves from this incident, which came when they were seeking Levelling Up funding from the UK Government for a new Kop stand. This application was rejected in January.

Nevertheless, Wrexham have pressed on with their Racecourse redevelopment, knocking down

Racecourse Ground ...Wrexham host Sheffield United in the FA Cup

WREXHAM
TikTok
TikTok

FA Cup run...Tom O'Connor celebrates scoring in the 3-3 draw with Sheffield United

Hollywood owners... Ryan Reynolds (L) and Rob McElhenney (R)

the dilapidated Kop. Having long fallen into disrepair, the plan is to construct a new 5,500-seater replacement, complete with hospitality and office space inside.

The Kop's demolition has created a vacant area behind one goal, and a similar sense of loss in fans of a certain vintage. However, most appreciate it was a sacrifice the club needed to make as part of broader plans to move forward.

With only three stands and demand for tickets through the roof, there are some growing pains. A cursory glance at social media tells you that not everyone who wants to go to games at the Racecourse is able to. Several years ago, supporters simply turned up and paid on the day; now home fixtures sell out weeks in advance.

Away sales are managed on a season-ticket first basis, with a half-hour virtual queue for some games. Over 1,300 tickets for the trip to Barnet – the club's penultimate away fixture and the day that promotion could be secured – had been sold five months before the match was due to be played.

Similar scarcity exists in replica shirts, with supply issues at certain points of the season leading to kits re-selling online for hundreds of pounds. A large majority of the 24,000 sales have been from across the Atlantic, where an exponentially growing fanbase pay £9.50 each week to stream games on the National League's new TV platform.

It is not by chance that the club has attracted global social media brand TikTok as a shirt sponsor – new fans are jumping on the bandwagon thick and fast. The recent signing of ex-England goalkeeper Ben Foster – who retired last year but has over a million subscribers to his YouTube channel – is another example of the club's committment to expanding its audience.

LAGER STAND
TikTok
30

These new fans are being treated to a Hollywood-worthy tussle at the top of the National League. As was the case last term, Wrexham are not the only historic side vying for promotion. Going toe-to-toe with them for the league title – the division's only automatic promotion slot – are Notts County.

The world's oldest professional club are putting up a stern test under coach Luke Williams. Powered on by 30-goal striker Macaulay Langstaff, the Magpies are a formidable outfit. Like Wrexham, it is a club steeped in history that feels it belongs in the Football League. Relegation from League Two in 2019 ended a 130-year stay in the EFL for them, while the three years spent trying to return has been fraught with challenges, drama and heartbreak, losing in the play-offs each time. Perhaps, in a parallel universe, it is County with the Hollywood investors instead of Wrexham.

Likewise, Wrexham need little reminder of the consequences of missing out on top spot. Last season they finished six points behind champions Stockport County before losing 5-4 in the play-off semi-finals to eventual victors Grimsby Town. It was the fifth time in 15 seasons that Wrexham have lost in the non-league play-offs.

Rival fans are rooting for a similar outcome this term, accusing Wrexham of attempting to buy their way to promotion. Another common barb is that they are nothing more than a Hollywood plaything, with Sheffield United captain Sharp reportedly telling Wrexham's players after the FA Cup exit to "stick that up your documentary".

However, Wrexham fans feel their time in the spotlight is long overdue. Through the club's time in non-league they have watched the likes of Forest Green Rovers and Salford City – clubs with far higher budgets and much lower attendances – achieve promotion.

This season, Wrexham average crowds of just under 10,000 – not only the highest number in the National League, but also higher than most in League One and Two. True, that figure was much lower a few years ago, before Reynolds and McElhenney arrived, but the commitment and loyalty of Wrexham's diehard supporters cannot be doubted. In 2011, fans raised £127,000 in a single day to pay off an outstanding bond and save the club from oblivion.

Relegated from the Football League in 2008, Wrexham had previously spent 87 years as a fixture in the EFL and even participated in Europe frequently. Before 1995, Welsh clubs playing in England were eligible for the Welsh Cup, and Wrexham's record 23 victories in the competition thus brought them some famous nights in the Cup Winners' Cup, including knocking out Porto in 1984.

The overwhelming reason Wrexham ended up dropping out of the Football League came due to an unscrupulous owner who bought the club two decades ago with a view to developing the site of the historic Racecourse Ground – the oldest international football stadium in the world.

Now the longest-serving club in the division, for years the Red Dragons have floundered with broken wings. Fan ownership under the Wrexham Supporters Trust (WST) started brightly in 2011, but by the end of the decade things turned toxic, and when the 2019-20 season was curtailed due to COVID, Wrexham sat in 19th – the club's lowest league position in their entire 156-year existence.

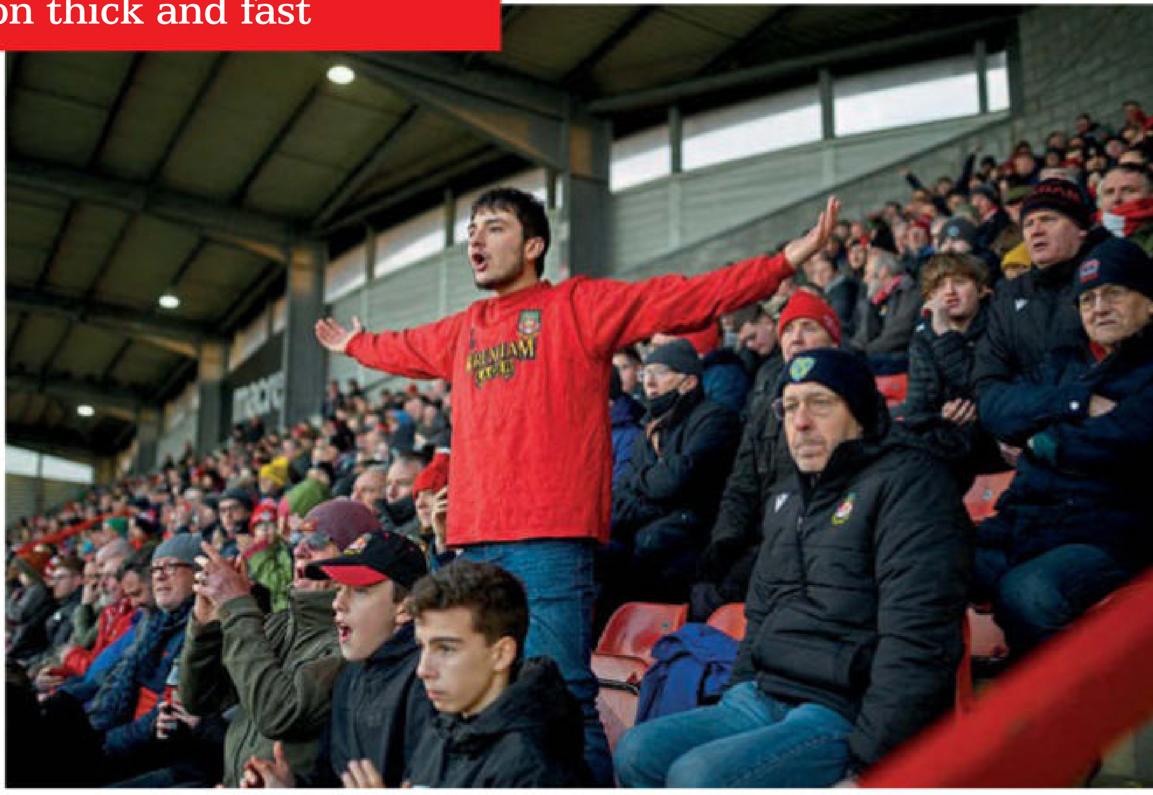
It is this perfect cocktail of tradition and misfortune that attracted McElhenney and Reynolds to buy the club. Keen to tell the story of reviving a local institution, the positive effects are being felt beyond the football pitch.

The town – and Turf pub in particular – has seen increasing numbers of tourists, including Will Ferrell, who visited in February to take in a 3-1 win over Wealdstone.

Not content with Hollywood royalty, King Charles III made his way to the Racecourse last December, visiting Wrexham to mark the award of city status as part of the Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

With global interest in the club at a point previously never seen, the sky is the limit for the sleeping giant of Welsh football.

> It is not by chance that the club has attracted global social media brand TikTok as a shirt sponsor – new fans are jumping on the bandwagon thick and fast



Sell-out crowds... the club averages the biggest attendance in the National League

BOY WONDER

After enjoying a bumpy ride since first bursting onto the scene as a teenage wonderkid in Norway, Arsenal captain Martin Odegaard is now fulfilling his vast potential

Words: Nick Bidwell

Martin Odegaard, one of the fulcrums of Arsenal's concerted push for their first Premier League title in almost two decades, has no need to be reminded that football can be a fickle business. The Norwegian attacking midfielder, 24, knows all about the vicissitudes of the top level, the ups and downs, the hype which can swiftly segue into a dead-end of frustration.

Once regarded as schoolboy prodigy – so much so that he drew comparisons with a certain Lionel Messi – Odegaard was a mere 15 when he made his full debut for Norway in 2014 and signed for the mighty Real Madrid just months later, joining them in a €4 million deal from the Stromsgodset club in January 2015. At the time, no other kid in Europe was as revered.

"It's a dream come true," gushed the teenager at his unveiling at Real's Valdebebas training HQ. The ensuing years, however, turned out to be anything but. His first three-and-a-half seasons involved nothing more than some relatively nondescript displays for Real's reserve team, Castilla, precious few first-team opportunities, and an 18-month loan in the Netherlands with Heerenveen.

It wasn't until the 2018-19 season that Odegaard began to show glimpses of what all the fuss had been about. In another season in the Eredivisie, this time with Vitesse Arnhem, he scored nine league goals and assisted 12 – a tally bettered only by Ajax stars Dusan Tadic and Hakim Ziyech. His form that year convinced Real Sociedad to take him on loan for the following season, where his performances improved at an astounding rate.

He had the option to stay in San Sebastian for another year and would have been delighted to take it up, conscious that he would be hard-pressed to displace the established midfield old guard of Luka Modric and Toni Kroos at the Bernabeu. He was persuaded to return to the capital but, as it turned out, his apprehension was well-founded: after just a handful of first-team starts in the opening phase of the 2020-21 season, he demanded a transfer.

adidas
Emirates
FLY BETTER
Arsenal

Boy wonder ...Odegaard is welcomed at his Real Madrid presentation

By this time, Real Sociedad had moved on, with David Silva taking Odegaard's starting spot and No.21 shirt. Instead it was Arsenal who provided his escape route, initially on a six-month loan, before signing him permanently in the summer of 2021 for a reported £35 million with add-ons.

Looking back now, it is a figure that represents considerable value for money. Immediately settling into the English game with an authoritative ease, he has enhanced Arsenal in so many different spheres. He is a key man in their pressing scheme, a fine leader by example – now established as the Gunners' skipper – and, most crucially, brilliantly creative, not least in his vision, cultured left foot and quick-witted off-the-ball movement.

He certainly landed on his feet when he came to North London. The fluid and penetrative style of play espoused by Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta suits him down to the ground. He benefits from being surrounded by vibrant like-minded young players. And, as he often points out, he now has the club stability he has long craved. This season very much is a novel experience for him – the first time since 2017–18 that he has played two consecutive seasons for the same club.

Record breaker... Odegaard coming off the bench for a Euro 2016 qualifier at the age of 15

At Arsenal he feels the love. He is trusted, valued and is in it for the long term. What he now enjoys at the Emirates are the same sentiments of familiarity, solidarity and pleasure that he always has experienced with various Norwegian representative XIs. "When picked for national team duty, he was always very happy because he was playing with friends, guys whom he knew very well," explained former Norway Under-21 boss Leif Gunnar Smerud in an interview with the French magazine *So Foot*. "Martin is a team player. He has to develop his relationship with team-mates and coaches on and off the field. And that takes time."

His career has turned full circle. A decade after being depicted as the football world's leading teen sensation, he has now regained that universal appeal. So much for those who looked at his difficulties at Real and repeated loan spells and concluded that he was just another of those incredibly gifted youngsters who could not carry the load; see Freddy Adu, Nii Lamptey, Bojan Krkic, Jermaine Pennant, Anthony Le Tallec et al.

Born and raised in Drammen in southeast Norway, he looked a special talent from the word go. At the age of ten, he distinguished himself by scoring 11 goals in a game for the Drammen Strong sports club; he always competed against kids two or three years older than himself and after moving to Stromsgodset, the leading club in his hometown, was just 13 when he played in his first senior game for the club, a friendly against local rivals Mjondalen.

Cue an amazing sequence of precocious record-breaking. He became the youngest player in the histories of the Norwegian top flight (15 days and 118 days in April 2014), the Norway national team (15 years and 253 days in August 2014), and the European Championship qualifiers (15 years and 300 days in October 2014).

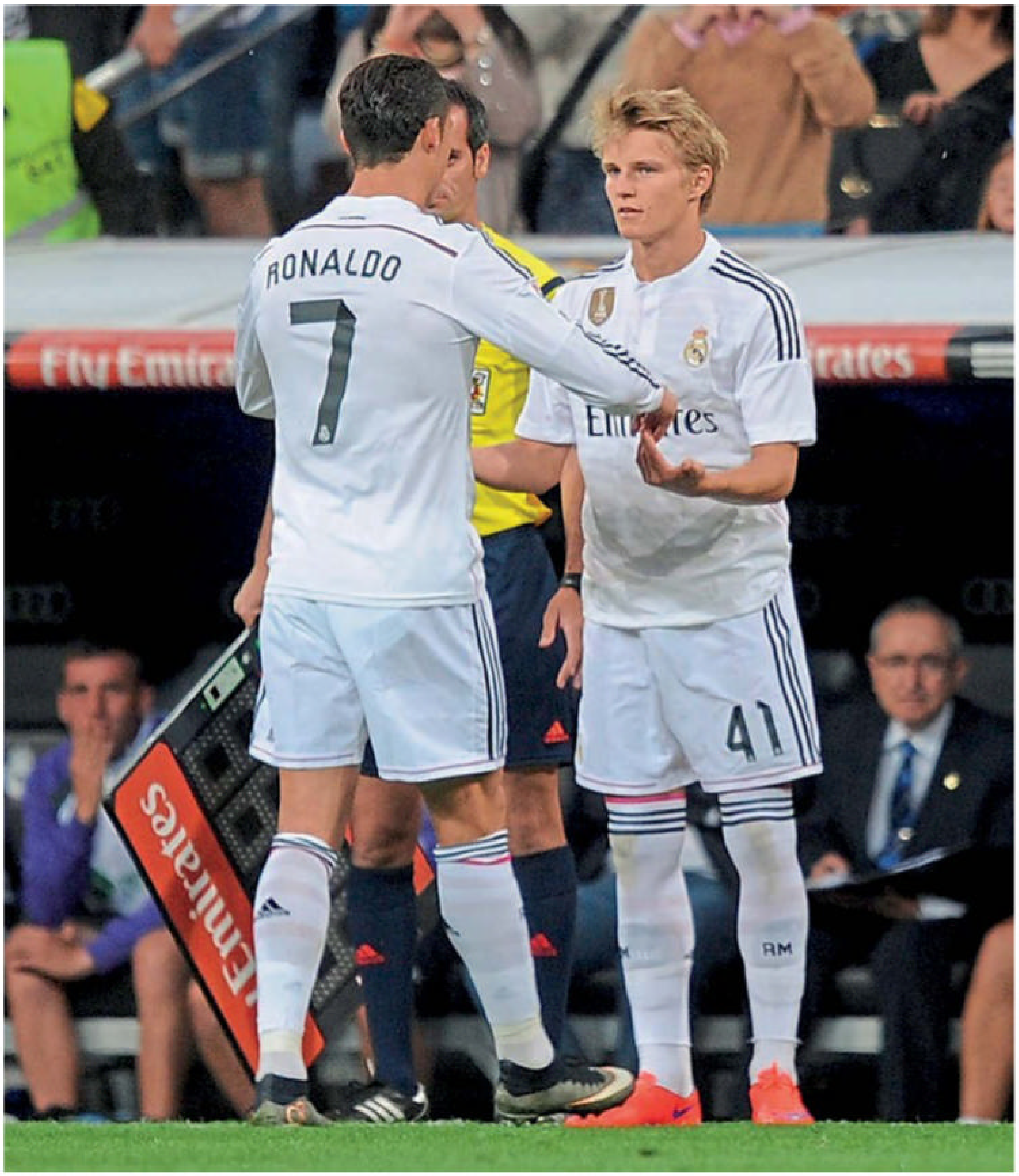
To say he was closely monitored as a teenager does not do justice to the wildfire of interest he was subject to in those days. Every big club in Europe – among them Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, Arsenal, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund and Juventus – were battling to enrol him. "At the start of it all, it seemed absurd that all these clubs were interested in Martin," said his father Hans Erik in an interview with the BBC. "Now we're used to it. We've been contacted by over 30 European clubs, including some of the most famous."

Inevitably, the story of the boy wonder from Drammen would catch the media's imagination too. Stromsgodset would regularly receive 100-plus requests for press accreditation from every corner of the globe, while the Norwegian press had a field day chronicling his feats. They simply could not get enough of him.

> **"I remember sitting at a table and chatting with Martin and his father…he has become the player that he was expected to back then"**
> **Jurgen Klopp on trying to sign Odegaard for Borussia Dortmund**

The race for his signature was an intriguing multipolar affair, with young Odegaard literally going on a tour of Western Europe to check out club facilities. Barcelona thought they were in the running until a FIFA transfer ban scuppered their plans. Manchester United brought him over, only for the negotiations to take a turn for the worse when then-Red Devils manager Louis van Gaal reportedly took umbrage at the suggestion that the teenager should train with the first team straight away. Liverpool rolled out the red carpet too, inviting him for a three-day visit. As a Liverpool fan, that must have been a thrill.

Bayern Munich's coach at the time, Pep Guardiola was a huge fan, while Dortmund also went on a major charm offensive spearheaded by then-boss Jurgen Klopp. "He was a 15-year-old playing senior football in Norway and the whole world was crazy about him," recalled Klopp in an interview with Danish broadcaster *TV2* last autumn. "I remember sitting at a table and chatting with Martin and his father. It's like it was yesterday. While he didn't come to us [Dortmund], I've continued to follow him. He had some difficult times early in his



***Galacticos*...Odegaard replaces Cristiano Ronaldo for his Real Madrid debut in 2015**

career. But it's made him the man he is today. He has become the player that he was expected to back then."

For quite some time, Bayern Munich believed they were in pole position to sign him. Ultimately, however, the teenager decided to throw in his lot with Real Madrid. Several factors tipped the balance in their favour: the enticing prospect of having the iconic Zinedine Zidane as his coach with Real's reserves; the academy coaching role which Real handed his father; the chance to regularly train with the Bernabeu senior stars and the fact that he could play competitive football immediately in Spain's lower tiers.

Yet it would not work out at *Los Blancos*. Either as the coach of Castilla or the first team, Zidane never particularly took to the young Norwegian and there was a feeling in some quarters at the Bernabeu that Odegaard enjoyed preferential treatment, particularly with regard to the licence he had to practise with the seniors while turning out for the reserves.

Club politics also played a part in fuelling resentment and isolating him. According to French website *10 Sport*, Real president Florentino Perez had to issue a diktat to force Zidane to include Odegaard in his squad for a pre-season tour of North America in the summer of 2016. In his 2016 book *Quiet Leadership*, Carlo Ancelotti went as far as to suggest that the club's signing of Odegaard was a marketing tool. "When [club president] Florentino Perez buys a Norwegian footballer, you simply have to accept it. Furthermore, the president decided that he [Odegaard] would play three games with the first team as a public relations exercise...He could be the best player in the world, but I don't care because he was not a player I asked for. That signing was to do with PR."

> "He could be the best player in the world, but I don't care because he was not a player I asked for. That signing was to do with PR"
>
> **Carlo Ancelotti on Odegaard**

Impressive...Odegaard was a standout star for Real Sociedad

Talentscout

In November 2014, Odegaard appeared in *World Soccer* for the first time...

Already the youngest player to represent Norway, Odegaard's appearance as a substitute for his country against Bulgaria in October's Euro 2016 qualifier made him – at 15 years and 300 days – the youngest person to ever play in the competition.

With his Messi-like dribbling and mesmerising stop-start moves, he has the world at his feet. And over the past few months, technical directors at all the top football addresses have taken to decorating their offices with portraits of the left-footed attacking midfield prodigy. According to his father, Hans Erik Odegaard – himself a former long-serving Stromsgodset midfielder – no fewer than 30 major European clubs have made approaches for his son.

Leading Spanish sports paper *Marca* claims that Real Madrid have bid €12 million for the youngster, while Oslo tabloid *VG* has it on good authority that a Paris Saint-Germain bigwig has been ringing Norwegian federation general-secretary Kjetil Siem for information. Barcelona, meanwhile, had three scouts checking out his progress during Stromsgodset's league game with Sogndal, and Odegaard junior has already visited the facilities at Manchester United, Bayern Munich and Stuttgart.

So how refreshing it is that neither the player nor his father seem to be falling victim to the hype and the hysteria. The down-to-earth teenager clearly has a wise head on old shoulders, and Hans Erik Odegaard is sensibly prioritising long-term sporting development over a hasty dash for fame and fortune abroad.

"He's been in the public eye for a while, and as he's only 15 there's no question of him standing on his own feet just yet," says Odegaard senior. "He is as focused as ever, serious about training hard and becoming a better player.

"He's so engaged and football gives him so much pleasure. We have to protect him from the damage this attention may cause."

Yet for all his extravagant talent – the pirouettes,

FAR RIGHT: Sought after...Odegaard in action for Stromsgodset

Loan star...Odegaard takes on Ajax for Vitesse in 2019

Martin had much to prove when sent on an 18-month loan to Dutch side Heerenveen early in 2017. This was his first taste of senior football in a consequential European league and, in order to make sure that their boy would have a copious diet of top grade football, Real inserted a penalty clause in the loan deal, with Heerenveen due to pay €40,000 for every match the youngster did not appear in. Real's intentions were sound enough but, in reality, their stipulation would cause more problems than it solved.

On arriving at the Abe Lenstra stadium, Odegaard declared the move "the best decision for my development". Yet he would produce little to justify those words over the next year-and-a-half. He only showed occasional glimpses of his real ability and it's fair to say that Heerenveen coach Jurgen Streppel was not totally convinced by him.

He would shine much more brightly for Vitesse, his next loan assignment, throughout the 2018-19 campaign. Nominally lining up on the right flank but given freedom to float centrally whenever he felt the inclination, he not only piled upon the goals and assists; he was every inch the conductor-in-chief of Vitesse's attacking operation. Virtually all their best moves were inspired by his dribbling ability, work between the lines and defence-splitting passes.

Leading Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* informed its readers in the spring of 2019 that Ajax had him atop of their wish list. In a typically modest response, Odegaard claimed he was not worth the supposed €20m fee. "I've read the rumours but don't know if they are true," he told *Marca*. "I don't think I'm worth that much."

Towards the end of the 2018-19 season, he was reportedly spotted at the Amsterdam Arena – apparently to hold talks with Ajax's then-director Marc Overmars – but in the end no deal was agreed. Instead, he would complete his hat-trick of loan moves, this time heading to the Basque Country to wear the blue-and-white stripes of Real Sociedad. Here was his long-awaited chance for La Liga redemption and how impressively he grabbed it, absolutely outstanding as *La Real* achieved a commendable sixth-place finish in the domestic championship and Copa del Rey triumph (albeit missing the final, which was postponed for a year because of coronavirus).

Playing centrally in the Sociedad midfield, just behind the main striker, he was class personified, showcasing his extraordinary touch, imagination and intelligence on the counter-attack. What a comeback, what an impressive young leader and what a sea-change in fortunes, going from Real Madrid flop to Spanish football's revelation of 2019-20. "There's no doubt that Martin is someone to make the difference," Sociedad coach Imanol Alguacil told *Radio Marca* in June 2020. "He's a top player."

Reaching for the sky is rarely a painless process, and even the most talented have no guarantees of fulfilment. Odegaard has had to deal with some barren times, but thanks to his patience and strong character has realised the summit of his potential – and there may be even more to come. Lifting a Premier League title, as Arsenal captain, would cap it all off.

the mazy runs, the stepovers, the backheels, the splendid goals and assists – he has only been playing in the Norwegian top flight for six months and still has a long road to tread.

While it's all well and good being the youngest player and marksman in Tippeligaen history, he now has to maintain the early momentum. And in the opinion of Stromsgodset's director of sport, ex-Norway international striker Jostein Flo, the boy will be up to the challenge.

"Martin was good enough to play for the senior Norway team quite some time ago," insists Flo. "He has been performing to an incredibly high standard and trains with maximum concentration and intensity.

"He's dedicated. He doesn't take himself to be some sort of pop star."

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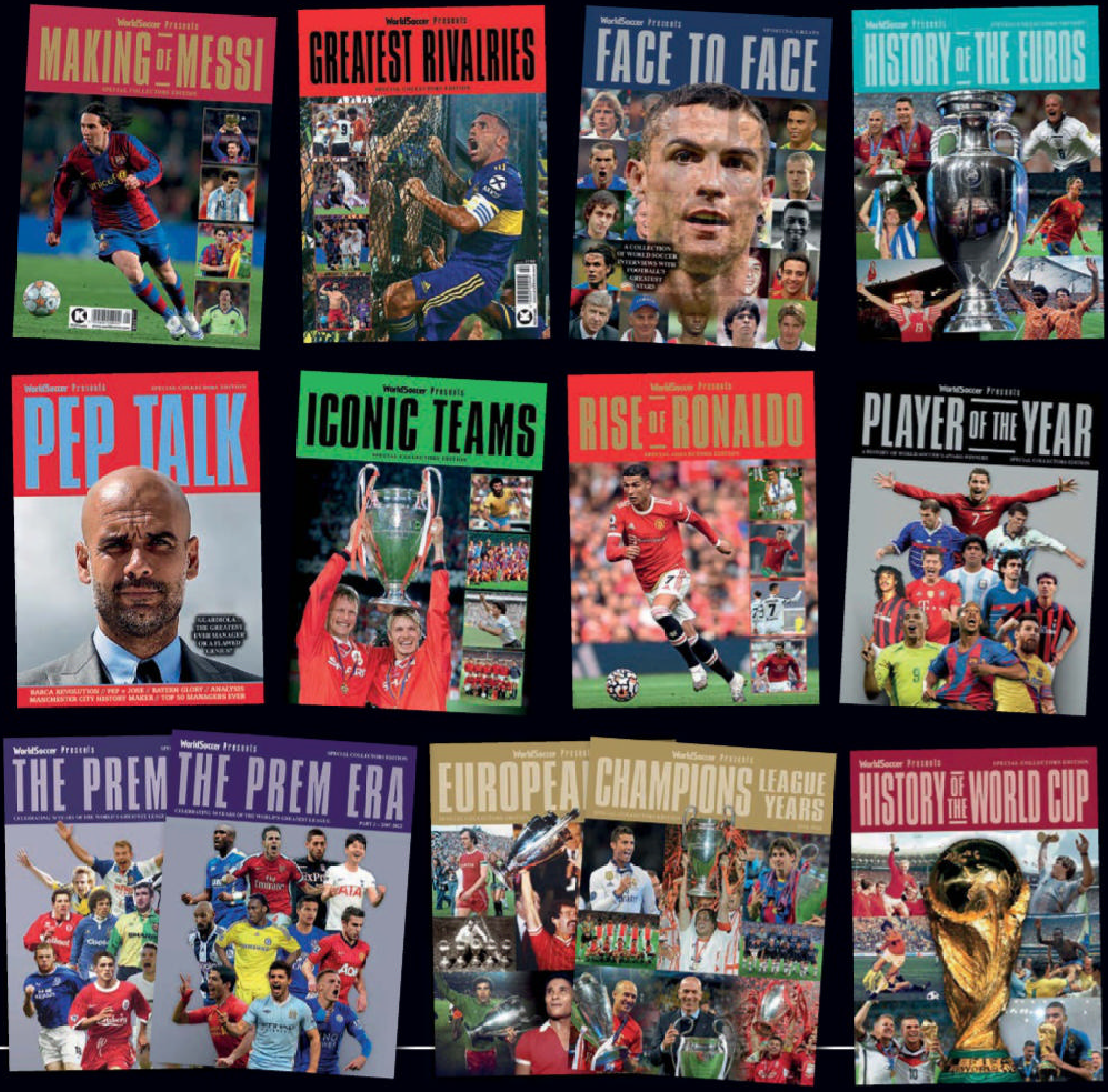
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2022-23 SEASON UPDATE

As Europe's top five leagues approach the business end of the campaign, we pose the big questions and attempt to tackle the major talking points of the season so far

40
PREMIER LEAGUE

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BUNDESLIGA

Premier League update

What next for Graham Potter?
Graham Potter's start at Chelsea was actually pretty good. He won six and drew three of his first nine games. There was some rumbling about the underlying numbers, but results were results. And then things went wrong very quickly indeed. His next 17 games brought just three wins, against Dinamo Zagreb, Bournemouth and Crystal Palace. The underlying numbers were reasonable but results are results. The question then was whether he was out of his depth.

Progress to the Champions League quarter-finals and a couple of decent Premier League wins in March don't necessarily answer that question of Potter's level one way or the other, but they did at least ease some of the immediate pressure on him. The club, in fairness to it, has continued to back Potter throughout, but questions remain both about the Chelsea project and about Potter's role within it.

Including Christopher Nkunku, who is expected to join in the summer, Chelsea will have spent £620m on players since the Clearlake takeover fronted by Todd Boehly. The focus on youth is at least a contrast to the wealthy owners who focus on stars. But there are questions as to whether Chelsea now have too many young players and about whether they have been bought to any plan. Potter appears to have settled on a back three, but with wing-backs is there any place for wingers such as Mykhailo Mudryk and Noni Madueke, bought at a combined cost of £120m?

Under scrutiny ...Graham Potter

Paradox...has Haaland made City better or worse?

The issue of whether Potter can cope with a club of Chelsea's stature is much harder to assess. All managers have a level at which they feel most comfortable. Potter's emotional intelligence suggests he can adapt to circumstances, as he has in the past, and the fact there have so far been no complaints from a notoriously leaky dressing room bodes well. But the truth is that until he has done it, there are no guarantees Potter's methods will work with superstar players.

The Haaland paradox...
At the time of writing, Erling Haaland is on course to score 40 league goals, smashing the existing record of 34, jointly held by Andy Cole and Alan Shearer. Yet Manchester City as a whole are on course for 94 goals, five fewer than they got last season, while at present rates they'll concede 35, nine more than last season. Haaland

Inconsistent...Mo Salah misses from the penalty spot against Bournemouth

is a magnificent forward and a great goalscorer, but it may be that he has made City as a team worse.

What is the reason for Liverpool's inconsistency this campaign?
How can a team go in the space of one week from beating Manchester United 7-0 to losing 1-0 at Bournemouth, whom they had beaten 9-0 earlier in the season? Having come within two games of the quadruple last season, Liverpool have been a great bafflement this. Almost everything has gone wrong. Perhaps it is simply the nature of hard-pressing system teams that, when a glitch occurs, all the machinery spins out of control. And much of that machinery suddenly looks quite old. There are signs that the front three of Mohamed Salah, Darwin Nunez and Cody Gakpo could click – with Luis Diaz still to return – but big problems remain in midfield where, despite the emergence of Stefan Bajcetic, Liverpool look short of a couple of experienced players.

What's going on at Tottenham?
For a team who seemed regularly to play terribly, Tottenham, under Antonio Conte, won a remarkable number of games. This has been a dreadful year for the Italian, who lost three people close to him, and by the end of his tenure his weariness was clear. His final act as Spurs boss was a furious press conference after his side had thrown away a two-goal lead in a 3-3 draw with Southampton. A week later, he left the club. With Cristian Stellini in caretaker charge until the end of the season, who comes next? Mauricio Pochettino, mysteriously unemployed since leaving PSG, is among the favourites, although there is an understandable reluctance to return to a previous manager. Also in the running are Julian Nagelsmann, Luis Enrique, Thomas Frank, Roberto De Zerbi and Eintracht Frankfurt's Europa League-winning boss Oliver Glasner.

> Haaland is a magnificent forward and a great goalscorer, but it may be that he has made City as a team worse

Manchester United's bumpy return to form...
On the one hand, Manchester United have looked much more like a serious team this season. They've beaten Arsenal, Manchester City and Barcelona and there has been a sense of purpose and clarity about much of their play. But on the other, they have lost 4-0 to Brentford, 6-3 to City and 7-0 to Liverpool. A fragility remains and the flaws of the past decade will not easily be eradicated. But in Erik ten Hag, they have a tough, single-minded manager who has principles and dealt decisively with Cristiano Ronaldo. For the first time since Sir Alex Ferguson left, the trajectory feels upward.

Dreadful year ...Antonio Conte

Return to form... Bruno Fernandes and Marcus Rashford

La Liga update

Are Barcelona as strong as their league results suggest?
No real shockwaves were sent across Europe when Barcelona crashed out of the Champions League group stage in November. Despite all the summer investment, there was a palpable sense that they were still a level behind Bayern Munich, Internazionale and the competition's true elite.

Yet domestically, Barca have kept on winning. They hit 50 points by the league's halfway stage and, perhaps even more impressively, kept 19 clean sheets in their opening 25 games. Their defensive resilience and authoritative brilliance of goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen saw them record six successive away victories by a single goal.

Barcelona are not blowing teams away like Napoli are in Serie A or as Manchester City have done in the Premier League, but a pragmatic control introduced by coach Xavi has allowed them to continue to beat teams of lesser quality. They may not have the swagger of brilliant Barca teams of the past, but they have become consistent and formidable winners.

Liga leaders... Barcelona are on course for the title

Is the Diego Simeone era coming to an end at Atletico Madrid?
If there is a player that sums up the malaise of Atletico Madrid this season, it is Joao Felix. The poor form of the club's record signing, and his deteriorating relationship with coach Diego Simeone, had been at the heart of Atleti's struggle this season.

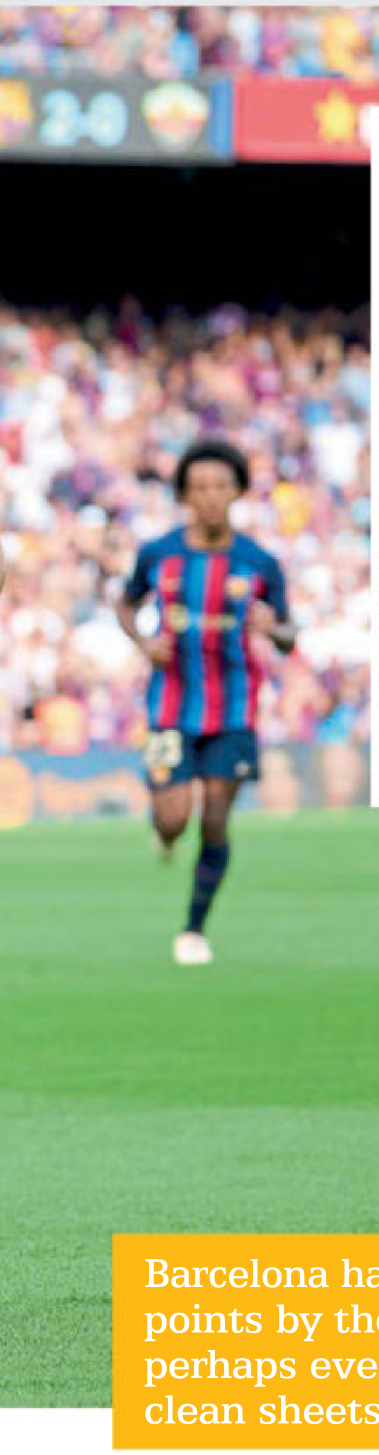
Yet rather than sell him, Atletico opted to send him on loan to Chelsea until the summer, with no permanent option, and a refreshed contract penned before he left for London. Something has to give when Felix returns this summer, and it is unlikely to be the Portuguese forward.

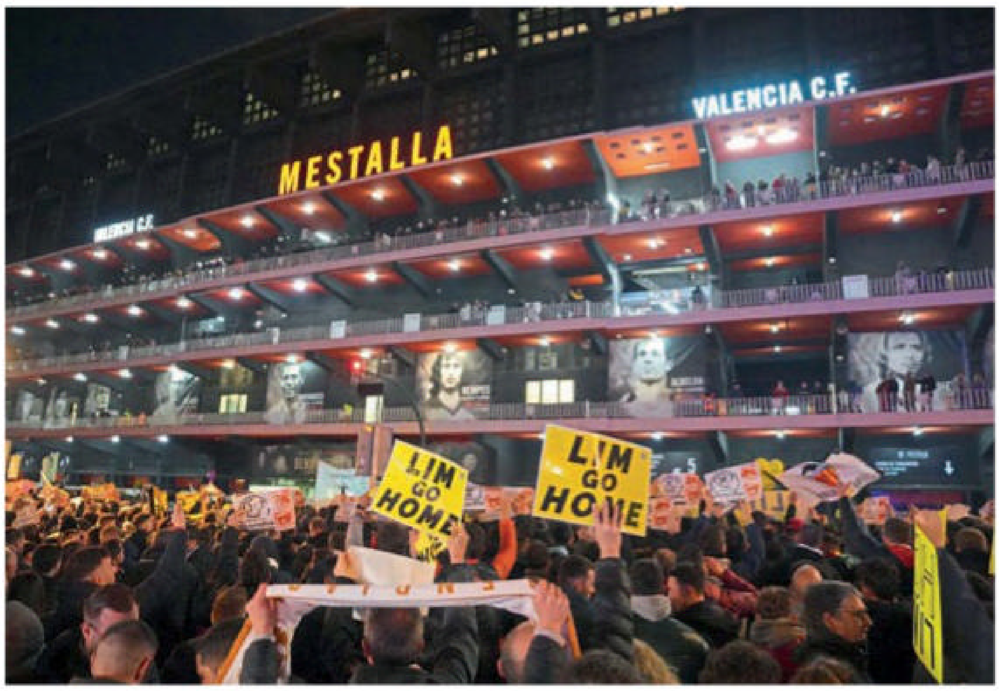
End of an era?...Diego Simeone reacts to his side's Champions League exit

Atletico have substantial debts – which also help to explain the €10m loan fee they pocketed for Felix – so finishing fourth in their Champions League group was nothing short of a disaster. Meanwhile, Simeone is, by some distance, the best-paid coach in world football and there is a strong sense that his remarkable era at the club has reached its natural end.

Simeone is under contract until 2024, but reports in Spain suggest he may be prepared to exit a year early. His successes at Atletico were built on unity and a clear, coherent identity. The Felix situation indicates the erosion of this formula.

Is Valencia the worst-run club in the country?
When Singaporean businessman Peter Lim bought Valencia in 2014 there was a huge sense of relief. The club were in a permanent state of debt and disarray, forced to continually sell





Protests... Valencia fans outside the Mestalla stadium

> Barcelona have kept on winning. They hit 50 points by the league's halfway stage and, perhaps even more impressively, kept 19 clean sheets in their opening 25 games

their star players as they slipped further and further from the glory years of the early 2000s when they won two La Liga titles and reached two Champions League finals.

The club have only spent one season outside Spain's top flight since 1931, but are now in real danger of relegation – sitting in the bottom three before the start of March's international break.

The chasm between supporters and owner is significant and it is toxic. Lim has not been in the city for five years and has overseen a fire sale of players on the cheap. Fans accuse him of asset-stripping the club and using Valencia to support other areas of his business empire.

In February, former midfielder Ruben Baraja became the tenth manager to be appointed by Lim. The return of a popular ex-player was an attempt to assuage growing fan protests, but supporters remain committed to ending Lim's grip on the club.

Which club has been this season's over performers?

With struggles on and off the pitch across Spanish football's natural challengers to Barcelona and Real Madrid, two clubs have bucked the trend.

Real Sociedad – who beat Manchester United to top spot in their Europa League group – looked to have established themselves as Spain's third-best team with a squad built on a mix of youth-team graduates and clever recruitment. Their budget, as set by La Liga, is €111m for the season – equivalent to a third of Atletico Madrid's or a sixth of Barca or Real.

While *La Real* briefly threatened to make it a three-way battle for La Liga before a poor run of results in February and March, Rayo Vallecano (whose budget is below €50m and the fifth-lowest in the league) are pushing for a Europa League spot. This is a club who have only spent more than €3m on transfer fees twice in their history, and whose average home attendance is only 12,500.

Real Sociedad and Rayo Vallecano, led by highly-respected coaches Imanol Alguacil and Andoni Iraola respectively, have both demonstrated the benefits of clever recruitment and high-level coaching – breathing fresh life into La Liga this season.

What has happened to Sevilla?

At the start of 2022, Sevilla were second in La Liga and smelt the opportunity of their first La Liga title since 1946. Sensing the weight of history on their shoulders, they abandoned their natural instincts and business model – refusing to countenance sales of star players and instead spending big wages to lure Anthony Martial on loan from Manchester United.

The club recorded a top-four finish for the third successive season – the first time they had achieved this feat – yet their title challenge fell apart. Performances under Julen Lopetegui stagnated and their gamble failed.

Jules Kounde and Diego Carlos headed something of a fire sale in the summer, with unsuccessful replacements hastily recruited. At the halfway point of the season they were out of the Champions League and in the relegation zone, Lopetegui had been sacked, and protests were being staged against president Pepe Castro.

Sevilla's struggles mirrored those of other leading Spanish clubs, with doubts voiced over sporting director Monchi – the architect of their six Europa League titles and unprecedented domestic overachieving. Returning boss Jorge Sampaoli briefly turned their form around, but three defeats in four games before the end of March left the club just two points above the relegation zone and saw Sampaoli fired. As with Valencia and Atletico Madrid, things may get worse before they improve.

Flying high... Real Sociedad and Rayo Vallecano

PADDY AGNEW

Serie A update

Runaway leaders…Napoli have streaked ahead of the last two Italian champions, Internazionale and Milan

How have Napoli's title rivals fallen so meekly by the wayside?
Even the most superstitious of Neapolitans would find it hard to deny that, with the end of the season drawing close, the question is not so much *if* but rather *when* Napoli lift this season's Serie A title. In front from day one, and 19 points clear of closest rivals Lazio by the end of March, Napoli frankly have pulverised the opposition out of sight.

While the attacking duo of Nigeria hot-shot Victor Osimhen and Georgian winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia deserve tremendous credit – as do Kim Min-jae and captain Giovanni Di Lorenzo in defence, plus coach Luciano Spalletti – it must be said that Napoli's rivals have done themselves no favours.

Last year's winners, Milan, went through an almost inexplicable post-World Cup wobble, picking up just one win and suffering three consecutive defeats (including a 1-0 loss to rivals Internazionale in the Milan derby) in their first six games of 2023, effectively ruling themselves out of the title race.

Despite that derby win, Inter also appeared to definitively blow their title hopes by dropping ten points to Monza, Empoli, Sampdoria and Bologna during a disastrous late January through February, while another major title rival appeared to bite the dust when Juventus were handed a massive points deduction.

At what point is the Juventus Prisma investigation?
These are still early days in the complex Juventus Prisma investigation in which Italy's most famous club finds itself accused of a range of alleged financial wrongdoings regarding player transfers and wages within the ambit of a Turin Public Prosecutor's investigation.

This inquiry could have grave consequences not only for Juventus but also for other Italian clubs. There was direct proof of that in late January when the Italian Federation's appeals court docked Juve 15 points.

Even if the Old Lady emphatically deny any wrongdoing, it seems almost certain that things will get worse before they get better, with media speculation reporting that the Turin investigators

Tough times …Juventus

have passed on their findings to State Attorney colleagues in Bologna, Cagliari, Genoa, Modena, Bergamo and Udine. There is more fallout to come.

How has Silvio Berlusconi's return to Serie A with Monza gone?
Within just four years, media tycoon and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the man who guided Milan to the top of the world in the late 1980s and early '90s, has taken his new club Monza from the third tier to Serie A for the first time in their history.

Things did not begin well in the top flight, with Monza recording five defeats and a draw in their opening six games, leading to the sacking of former Milan player Giovanni Stroppa, who had led the club to their historic promotion.

Crisis club... Sampdoria

Stroppa's replacement, ex-Juventus winger Raffaele Palladino, made a dream start by defeating Juve 1-0 in his first game (followed by victories over Sampdoria and Spezia), and by the end of March they had climbed to mid-table, picking up a second victory against Juventus – 2-0 in Turin – in the process.

> Napoli frankly have pulverised the opposition out of sight…[but] it must be said that their rivals have done themselves no favours

The side's relative success has rekindled Berlusconi's enthusiasm for an expensive, footballing plaything – and all of it has been achieved with a squad featuring the classic mix of experience and fresh talent, promotion winners and useful imports, including Italy midfielders Matteo Pessina and Stefano Sensi, experienced defender Armando Izzo, Brazilian Carlos Augusto and ex-Verona striker Gianluca Caprari.

Berlusconi's bus ...Monza fans pay tribute to their owner

Where has it all gone wrong for Sampdoria?
The 1990-91 *Scudetto* winners and runners-up to Barcelona in the 1992 European Cup seem destined for relegation. The October sacking of coach Marco Giampaolo in favour of Dejan Stankovic – the former Lazio and Internazionale midfielder and Red Star Belgrade coach – has so far not paid off. The Serbian has a mountain to climb after inheriting a side with just two points from their first eight games, but Samp's problems run much deeper.

Facing reported debts of up to €150m, the club's financial future is bleak. The current owner, Massimo Ferrero, was forced to step down as club president in December 2021, yet has refused to sell up. Fans will be hoping that former player and now-president, Marco Lanna, can find new buyers to bring some much-needed stability.

In February, Samp narrowly avoided a points deduction for failing to pay staff, and time is running out to save the club – both on and off the pitch.

Which attackers have shone most outside of Naples?
After relatively indifferent spells at Everton, RB Leipzig, Fulham and Leicester City, Ademola Lookman looks to have found his feet at Atalanta. The forward has taken his time to fulfil his potential since bursting onto the scene as a teenager with Charlton Athletic, yet by the end of March only his Nigeria team-mate Osimhen and Inter's World Cup-winning striker Lautaro Martinez had scored more Serie A goals. Indeed, Lookman's form has been so impressive that he has been touted to join Napoli if Osimhen leaves Naples this summer.

Impressing ...Ademola Lookman

Elsewhere, struggling Spezia would be dead and buried without Angolan striker M'Bala Nzola, who has scored more than half of their goals, while Roma are a much better side when Paulo Dybala isn't injured.

Bundesliga update

What were the key factors behind Bayern Munich's shock decision to sack coach Julian Nagelsmann and replace him with Thomas Tuchel?
In the first three months of 2023, disquiet if not outright panic had slowly been building in the Bayern boardroom. Prior to the World Cup in Qatar, Bayern had looked as unassailable as usual, top of the Bundesliga table and no fewer than nine points ahead of arch-rivals Borussia Dortmund. However, since the league restarted, the tables have sensationally turned, Bayern sloppily dropping points left, right and centre, while Dortmund surged to the league summit.

In the Allianz Arena corridors of power, confidence in Nagelsmann simply drained away. Following poor league results, a lack of entertaining football, the stunted development of certain players and the outbreak of dressing room friction, Bayern decision-makers – and in particular director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic and chairman Oliver Kahn – no longer felt Nagelsmann was a hill worth dying on. Bayern have long been admirers of Tuchel's work and, with rumours circulating that he was in talks with other big clubs, Kahn and Salihamidzic came to the conclusion that the former Dortmund, PSG and Chelsea boss soon would be unavailable. Time to act.

In form...Julian Brandt has become indispensable for Borussia Dortmund

How important has Julian Brandt become for a resurgent Dortmund?
Since the Bundesliga restarted after the World Cup/winter break, the Westfalenstadion winger or attacking midfielder has been simply outstanding, providing much of the impetus for Dortmund's emergence as genuine title contenders. On the scoresheet in four consecutive fixtures in February – all of them wins – Brandt has not enjoyed such a hot goalscoring streak for years (the last dating from the 2015-16 campaign when he played for Bayer Leverkusen).

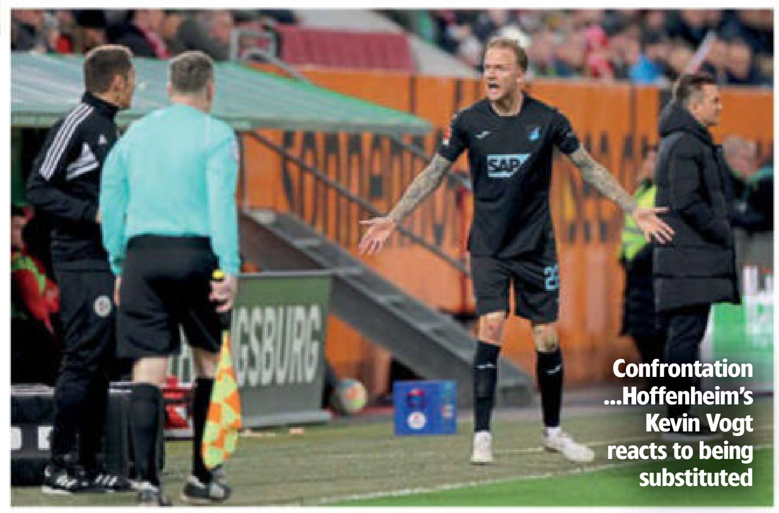
In a line-up built to be on the front foot, the Bremen-born star has also excelled creatively, on hand with assists in victories over Augsburg and Leverkusen. Up until this season, most observers of the Bundesliga scene saw Brandt as a hugely talented but flawed individual, a technically exceptional player with inconsistency demons. Not anymore. Suddenly, he can be relied upon to deliver.

Is Hoffenheim's 15-year adventure in the Bundesliga coming to an end?
In what now looks like a seven-team relegation battle – also involving Schalke, Bochum, Stuttgart, Hertha Berlin, Cologne and Augsburg – Hoffenheim arguably are the least equipped for a survival mission. Collectively and individually, they have fallen apart these past few months, seemingly trapped in a never-ending spiral of defeats before a huge victory over relegation rivals Hertha just before the international break. The atmosphere in the camp could not have been worse. Some players, such as defender Kevin Vogt, who lost his head when taken off during a defeat to relegation rivals Augsburg, are angry and belligerent; others seem fearful or resigned to their fate. Confusion and bitterness abound.

At the start of the campaign, Hoffenheim harboured hopes of a top-four placing. Instead, everything has turned to ashes. New coach Pellegrino

Bayern appointment... Thomas Tuchel flanked by Oliver Kahn (L) and Hasan Salihamidzic (R)

Lethal front-line combo...Mainz's Karim Onisiwo and Marcus Ingvartsen



Confrontation ...Hoffenheim's Kevin Vogt reacts to being substituted

Matarazzo, who took over from the sacked Andre Breitenreiter in February, has a big job on his hands. A few years ago, Matarazzo was Julian Nagelsmann's number two at Hoffenheim, a period in which the Blues appeared in the Champions League. How time flies.

Is European qualification merely a fantasy for Mainz?

Far from it. In the two years that Bo Svensson has been in charge, the Danish coach has put together a side worth much more than the sum of its parts, a well-organised, cohesive team that presses the ball with ferocity in the opposition half and, after forcing a turnover, goes straight for the jugular. Full of determination, togetherness and ruthlessness, they have built up a great deal of momentum in 2023, winning four games in a row through February and March, including a maximum-point haul at Bayer Leverkusen and a stunning 4-0 home thrashing of Borussia Monchengladbach.

The Reds certainly have the firepower to secure a top-six finish. The Austrian-Norwegian front-line combo of Karim Onisiwo and Marcus Ingvartsen are both fine finishers, while plucky South Korean attacking midfielder Lee Jae-sung, picked up on a free transfer from Holstein Kiel back in 2021, has proved a sensational maker and taker of chances. The 30-year-old Korean is also a massive Premier League fan. Any takers?

What are the chances of European hopefuls Eintracht Frankfurt holding on to star striker Randal Kolo Muani beyond this season?

In an interview with *Sky Deutschland*, Frankfurt director of sport Markus Krosche recently insisted that the much-coveted France national team striker was not moving any time soon. "We've clearly said that we don't want to sell our best artists. There's no reason for it." But deep down Krosche must know that if the price is right (an offer in the region of €80m to €100m), the prolific Paris-born goal getter surely will be at a new club next season.

A year after signing Kolo Muani on a Bosman free from French side Nantes, the opportunity to spectacularly cash in should prove impossible to resist.

> Bayern decision-makers – and in particular director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic and chairman Oliver Kahn – no longer felt Nagelsmann was a hill worth dying on

Frankfurt are in a strong position. They have the Frenchman under contract until the summer of 2027, he has no release clause and the list of would-be buyers is a long one, featuring Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain and leading Premier League outfits.

In-demand star... Randal Kolo Muani

Ligue 1 update

Which player has surprised Ligue 1 the most this season?
Ligue 1 produces a cohort of exciting young players every year, but few success stories have been as unexpected as Folarin Balogun's. After just three goals across 18 outings for Championship side Middlesbrough last term, the Arsenal loanee is now battling the likes of PSG star Kylian Mbappe and Lille's Jonathan David for the Golden Boot in France.

Still just 21, Balogun is a modern-day penalty-box poacher, with a hint of Thierry Henry-esque swagger about him, most evident in his ability to cut in and shape a shot home. The England Under-21 international's combination of sharp anticipation plus intelligent movement and supreme composure make him lethal.

Although not a Harry Kane-type complete centre-forward, the range of Balogun's penalty-area finishing is still currently unrivalled outside Paris. Able to assess a situation ahead of the opposition and manufacture an efficient route to goal on the fly, Balogun is often seen hitting precise, snap volleys or calmly dropping a shoulder to round a goalkeeper or beating his marker to the near post and engineering a finish. Although penalty duties have helped boost his figures, Balogun's expected goals numbers suggest that he is not over-performing.

Reims president, Jean-Pierre Caillot, has admitted that signing the striker outright is now impossible due to his increased transfer value, with a second season on loan the club's best hope of keeping him. Yet with Mikel Arteta recently describing him as "incredible" and "special", he may be back at his parent club next season.

Who is the most exciting coach in Ligue 1?
Just 30 years old, Reims' Will Still is quickly becoming one of Europe's most exciting young coaches. Having succeeded the sacked Oscar Garcia, who deserves credit for instilling a renewed focus on young players and an impressive academy, Still went unbeaten in his first 17 league games, which included a late equaliser at Paris Saint-Germain and a 3-1 routing of a stacked Rennes, conceding just seven goals.

Still was born to British parents but grew up in Belgium playing the video game *Football Manager* which convinced him that coaching was his future, rather than playing. Having joined Preston North End's academy coaching staff at the age of 20, Still returned to Belgium, progressing from video analyst to caretaker manager across four top-flight sides before joining Reims' staff last summer.

Evolving Garcia's adaptable but often pragmatic, possession-based approach, Still has switched from a back three to a back four and added an aggressive press which suits his young, malleable squad, led by top goalscorer Folarin Balogun. Had the league started when Still took over, Reims would sit in fourth – a deserved position according to the underlying numbers. Once relegation candidates, a return to Europe is an achievable goal for the inaugural European Cup finalists.

Surprise package ...Folarin Balogun

Exciting coach ...Will Still

Under pressure... PSG's Christophe Galtier (L) and Luis Campos (R)

Is more change afoot at Paris Saint-Germain?

Three consecutive defeats across three competitions in mid-February – form unprecedented since the 2011 Qatari takeover – brought a familiar paranoia to Paris Saint-Germain. Haunted by previous European collapses, the futures of coach Christophe Galtier, sporting director Luis Campos and even the club's famed front three were questioned.

Campos, a master of identifying under-the-radar talent to push mid-sized clubs beyond expectations, is a little out of place at PSG and has been blamed for weak transfer business in successive windows. It was also Campos that championed the appointment of Galtier, and bizarrely appeared on the touchline during a rollercoaster 4-3 win over Lille to hurl his opinions at officials. The pressure, it seems, is beginning to tell.

Yet the Campos-Galtier era – the "end of bling-bling", as president Nasser Al Khelaifi put it in the summer – remains in its infancy. Furore over average results ignores Ligue 1's recent improvement, meaning such defeats will become common, and that competition is useful for Paris.

Still a return to the "bling-bling" days and a big-name coach can't be ruled out – after all, a return to Paris for Thomas Tuchel had been mooted before his appointment at Bayern Munich – but starting again just a few months into this new project would be more than hasty. Then again, it would also be typical of the club's obsession with immediate, cash-driven success.

How is the four-team drop zone affecting the league?

With both Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 in the process of cutting their numbers from 20 teams to 18, an unprecedented four sides will be automatically relegated from the French top flight this term. Although already one of Europe's most competitive divisions, Ligue 1's bottom half is becoming ever more fraught, with clubs well aware of both the financial rewards of a smaller top tier and the difficulties of a swift return.

Nine teams sacked their coaches between October 9 and January 9, with almost all of them acting out of a fear of the drop.

Of those clubs, only Angers appear doomed. Amid financial issues, they have steadily sold key players over the last 18 months and now appear to be woefully out of their depth.

Little separates the rest of the bottom half though, and a dramatic late scramble – reminiscent of the 2010-11 final day, when just five points split Lorient in seventh and Monaco in 18th – seems probable.

Why are Lyon struggling under Laurent Blanc?

Reflections on Laurent Blanc's time at PSG, encompassing eight trophies between 2013 and 2016 and little European progress, have improved with hindsight following the disappointing reigns of his successors. Yet after a spell in the Middle East, Blanc now appears something of a dinosaur in the newly vivacious Ligue 1.

Blanc's Lyon are unimaginative, one-dimensional and ineffective, despite boasting returning heroes Alexandre Lacazette and Corentin Tolisso, plus a host of burgeoning talent from their prolific academy, and are struggling in mid-table.

The sense is that OL are being out-thought and out-manoeuvred by more progressive outfits such as Still's Reims, Regis Le Bris' Lorient and Philippe Montanier's Toulouse. The prospect of consecutive seasons without European football for the first time in nearly 30 years is a major concern, both financially and sportingly, despite the investment of new American owner John Textor. A major overhaul is likely needed.

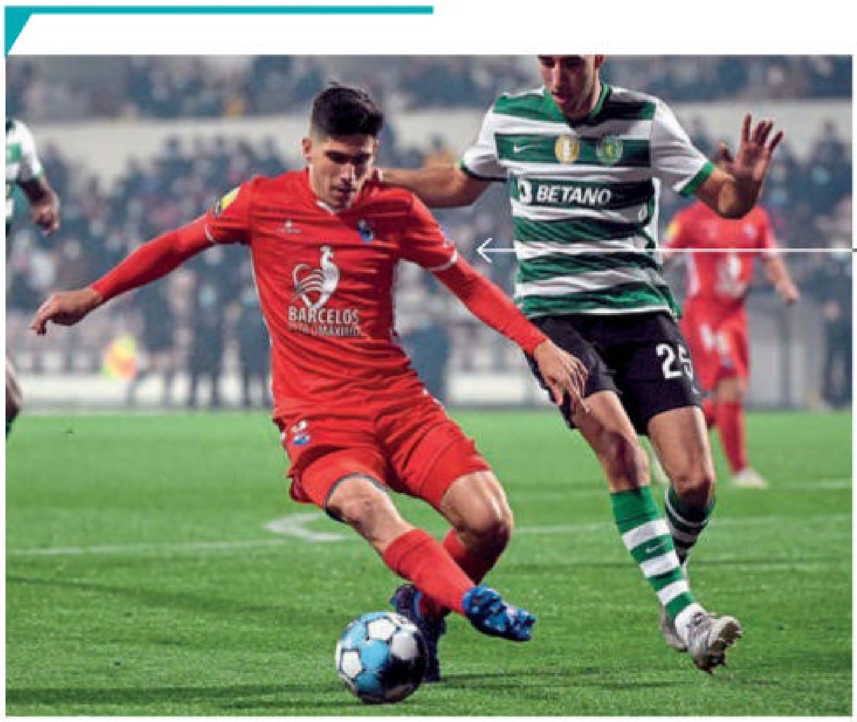
> Just 30 years old, Reims' Will Still is quickly becoming one of Europe's most exciting young coaches

Struggling... Laurent Blanc

6 of the best

Lesser league shining lights

Nick Bidwell takes a look at some of the stars of the season from outside Europe's top five leagues



1 Fran NAVARRO

GIL VICENTE (POR)

An irrepressible source of goals in the Portuguese top flight for Gil Vicente, 25-year-old Spanish striker Navarro has experienced a career of light and shade. Good enough to earn plenty of praise for his work in Valencia and Spain's youth teams, yet never making the grade at the Mestalla and then making next to no impact on loan at Belgian outfit Lokeren in 2020-21. Following a free transfer to Gil Vicente in the summer of 2021, he bagged 16 goals last season to help the club finish fifth and secure a place in the Europa Conference League qualifiers, and is on course to amass more in the current Primeira Liga campaign. Predatory in the box, good at holding the ball up and mobile, he is rated by all of Portugal's leading clubs.

2 Kyogo FURUHASHI

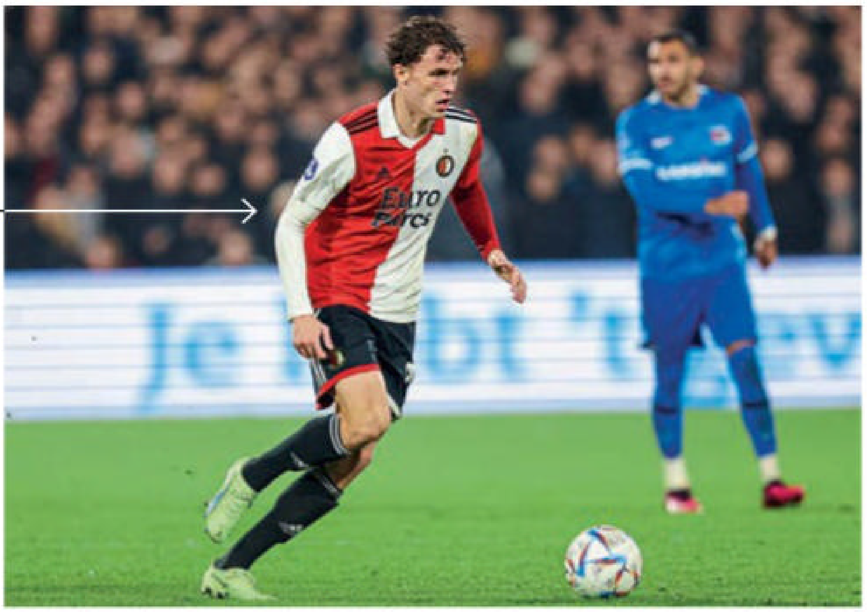
CELTIC (SCO)

Is it any wonder fans of the Hoops venerate the quicksilver Japanese striker? Furuhashi, 28, has been Celtic's not-so-secret weapon all season, netting with wild abandon in Scottish domestic competitions, including both goals in the recent 2-1 victory over arch-rivals Rangers in the League Cup final. In addition to the quality of his off-the-ball runs and cute finishing, the ex-Vissel Kobe ace has an incredible work ethic too, forever on the move, never shirking the physical aspect of the game and ever-ready to pressurise opponents in possession. Humility personified, he sees it as "his duty" to score goals, a wholesome attitude which does him immense credit.

3

Mats WIEFFER

FEYENOORD (NED)



Pay no attention to his fresh-faced, boyish looks. The 23-year-old is a monster of a defensive midfielder, a consummate ball-winner, outstanding in his ability to harry, cover and fill gaps, and a master of the timely interception. For an Eredivisie rookie – he only joined Feyenoord last summer from fellow Rotterdam club Excelsior – he has exceeded all expectations and has improved in other areas of his game, not least his strength on the ball, distribution and shooting (see the guided missile with which he scored recently versus Fortuna Sittard). Amazingly, Wieffer only became a Feyenoord starter in January, promoted when Quinten Timber fell injured. Now though, he is deservedly in the Dutch squad.

4

Sacha BOEY

GALATASARAY (TUR)

The Paris-born right-back, 22, had an injury-hit first season in Turkey after swapping Ligue 1 Rennes for the Istanbul red-and-yellows, but he has enjoyed an incredible 2022-23 with his dynamism, tenacity, quick feet and sense of adventure catching the eye. He cost Galatasaray just €1m in 2021, but he is now thought to come with a price tag several times that figure. With a number of Premier League clubs rumoured to be on his trail, including the likes of Liverpool, Crystal Palace and Newcastle United, Gala are busy working on a new contract for him, extending it to 2026, substantially improving his pay packet and inserting a €25m release clause.

5

Bilal EL KHANNOUSS

GENK (BEL)

It was hardly a surprise when, early this year, the 18-year-old Morocco midfielder was voted the best young player in Belgium. He has been in exceptional form this season for table-topping Genk, lighting up the Pro League with his vision, flair and wonderful ball control, his innate talent to move with the sphere glued to his feet. He has it all in the creative department: tempo-setting instincts, the ability to wreak havoc between the lines and a visceral need to always be at the heart of the action. Born in the Brussels suburbs, he featured for Belgium as a youth, only to opt in 2021 to represent his parents' homeland Morocco at senior level. Made one appearances for the Atlas Lions at Qatar 2022, the third-place play-off defeat to Croatia.

6

Lawrence ATI-ZIGI

ST GALLEN (SUI)

No player in the Swiss Super League was more impressive in the first half of the season than the Ghana keeper, who so often rescued his side with his brilliant shot-stopping skills, speed off his line and sheer disregard for his body when diving at an onrushing forward's feet. St Gallen director of sport, ex-Swiss national team winger Alain Sutter, knows only too well that it may be mission impossible to keep Ati-Zigi out of the clutches of more prestigious employers, particularly those from the Premier League. He first came to Europe as an 18-year-old, learning his trade in Red Bull Salzburg's farm system and at French outfit Sochaux.

SOMETHING IN THE WATER

A small corner of northern Spain is having a huge impact on the world of football

Words: Sid Lowe

Something in the water...La Concha bay, San Sebastian

Maybe it's the *txuleton*, Julen Lopetegui jokes. *Txuleton*, the giant T-bone steak, is central not just to the food but also the culture of the Basque Country, which is why it may not be such a huge leap to offer it up as an explanation for a footballing phenomenon: how a place so small can have an impact on the game so great, a generation of managers coming from a single corner of northern Spain. If once is chance, twice a coincidence and three times a pattern, this is something else again, something special, and it reaches right to the top.

Back in the late 1990s, Mikel Arteta played for a local youth club called Antiguoko, whose pitch lies close to the beach in the city of San Sebastian, home of Real Sociedad. He was not alone; among his team-mates there were a handful of other boys you will have heard of and men you will hear more from too. It's not just that Xabi Alonso and Andoni Iraola also made it as players, as did team-mates Aritz Aduriz and Xabi's brother Mikel, nor that they were internationals with over 1,400 professional games between them; it is that there was something stirred inside them and they too are now coaches.

Arteta's Arsenal team lead the Premier League. Alonso is at Bayer Leverkusen. And Iraola is at Rayo Vallecano, in an historically high place in La Liga, competing for the European spots. In February Leeds United tried to bring him to the Premier League. And that's just the start.

Leeds failed, for now. Had Iraola gone, he would have joined Arteta, plus Unai Emery and Lopetegui in England: four men – a *fifth* of all Premier League managers – who are all not just from the Basque Country but from the same province, Gipuzkoa. Instead Iraola stayed, and after Jose Luis Mendilibar took over Sevilla in March, it meant that a quarter of all La Liga's coaches are Basque.

They're successful too, accounting for four of the league's top nine (at the time of writing): Imanol Alguacil at Real Sociedad, Iraola at Rayo, Jagoba Arrasate at Osasuna and Ernesto Valverde at Athletic Club. Mendilibar takes charge of a struggling Sevilla, but has worked at Alaves, Eibar and Athletic, among many others.

All that would be extraordinary anyway, but here's the thing: the Basque Country accounts for just 1.4 per cent of Spain's territory and only 4.6 per cent of its population – but 44 per cent of the coaches in its nine best teams. Gipuzkoa, one of three Basque provinces within Spain, is the smallest in the whole country and has just 760,000 inhabitants, less than two per cent of the national population. San Sebastian, the capital, has 187,000 people, the 34th biggest city in Spain. Yet if Iraola had said yes – *bai*, in Basque – to Leeds, Gipuzkoa would have accounted for 20 per cent of Premier League bosses.

Nor does it end there. In the second division, Imanol Idiakez coaches Leganes and Joseba Etxeberria is at Mirandes. Juanma Lillo, Pep Guardiola's former assistant, is at Al Sadd in Qatar. Benat Labaien is in Japan. Benat San Jose is coaching in Bolivia. Luis Llopis is the goalkeeper coach at Real Madrid and Xabier Mancisidor has the same role at Manchester City. All of them, like Arteta, Alonso, Lopetegui, Emery, Iraola and Alguacil, are from Gipuzkoa.

Arrasate was born in neighbouring Basque province Vizcaya but developed as a coach in Gipuzkoa. Javi Gracia, who did take the Leeds job, is from Navarre next door, but played at Real Sociedad. Gaizka Garitano and Eder Sarabia (Basques if not Gipuzkoans) are at Eibar and Andorra respectively, and Asier Garitano took Leganes to La Liga.

Even if you include neighbouring Navarre as part of the Basque Country

ABOVE: Boyhood friends...Xabi Alonso and Mikel Arteta during their Premier League playing days

ABOVE RIGHT: Basque born and bred...Mikel Merino and Oscar De Marcos compete for the ball in the Basque derby

– and many do historically, culturally, socially, linguistically and politically, and certainly in sporting terms – this is still a territory that accounts for just 3.6 per cent of Spain's territory, 6.2 per cent of its population. By any measure, it is an astonishing output. There's something about the Basque Country, that's for sure. Something good.

It is not easy to explain how it happened, Emery admits. Lay out the list and even Inaki Ibanez, a former player based in San Sebastian whose IDUB global agency has represented just about everyone in the region at one stage or another (including Alonso, Iraola and Valverde currently), is struck by the length of it. He has watched something extraordinary unfold, although having accompanied them – Arrasate is the only man mentioned here that Ibanez hasn't worked with – he warns against a catch-all answer; their journeys have been different, he says, the influences varied, their styles too.

Some were always sure they were going to be coaches; others couldn't have imagined this. Arrasate, who never played beyond the third tier, is still officially on leave from his job as a teacher. The first time Alguacil left Real Sociedad's youth team to take temporary charge of the first team he was keen to go back again, unconvinced it was for him.

Lopetegui was part of a Barcelona squad under Johan Cruyff and then Bobby Robson that would end up counting its coaches in double figures. Xabi Alonso (whose father Periko, also a native of Gipuzkoa, played for Real Sociedad and Barca) worked under the best coaches there are – Rafael Benitez, Pep Guardiola, Jose Mourinho and Carlo Ancelotti – having departed home after coming through at Real Sociedad and spending four seasons in the first team there. Valverde played at Barcelona and Espanyol as well as Athletic. Emery began coaching at tiny Lorca, way down in the south east, when a knee injury ended a modest playing career. The Villa boss is now the owner of Basque third-tier club Real Union.

Arteta left San Sebastian for Barcelona at 15, growing up in their famed *La Masia* academy but departing before the first team, going on to build a playing and coaching career outside Spain. He ended up with Guardiola of course. "Mikel always stood out, there was something about his character," says Roberto Montiel, the vice-president at Antiguoko. "He had that cheek, in a good way. He was bold, an extrovert. Three of them went to *La Masia* together; he was the one that handled it best. He is very good at empathising with players."

But this is not chance and if the Arsenal manager was different, there is much that is shared: there is something broader, a common culture, an ecosystem in which they evolve. A value system and a structure that lays a stress on education and enjoyment, on development, that dovetails with coaching.

The Basque Country's two biggest clubs, Athletic and Real Sociedad, pride themselves on their youth development: Lezama and Zubieta are not just football academies, they are depositaries of an identity. Copa del Rey finalists against each other just 18 months ago, in the last Basque derby 25 of the 32 players used had played at pre-first team level for one of the two clubs and both managers were former players. That too reflects something deeper. This is a place of deep traditions, a powerful sense of self-identity, proud.

Born in the Basque province of Alava, a former Real Sociedad player, youth team and first team coach, Roberto Olabe is now the sporting director at the club who are currently competing for a top-four finish. He is the man who employed Imanol Alguacil as coach – a former player, youth team coach, and season ticket holder from a small fishing village just outside San Sebastian who led *La Real* to their first trophy in 30 years. And that is not chance either.

"We could have an entire conversation about sociology," Olabe says. "It starts in our socio-political context, our values. It's complex, intangible, but real: linked to the influence of society, family, the group. It's socio-affective, collaborative."

Asked to explain the phenomenon, Osasuna coach Arrasate puts forward a name, a man through whose hands so many of them passed: Mikel Etxarri.

TOP-FLIGHT BASQUE BOSSES

...In Europe's top five leagues

Ernesto VALVERDE
Athletic Club

Imanol ALGUACIL
Real Sociedad

Andoni IRAOLA
Rayo Vallecano

Jagoba ARRASATE
Osasuna

Over four decades he was at Real Sociedad, coached the Basque representative team, and led the coaching school in Gipuzkoa. Etxarri talks fondly of a team photo he has: just in front of him is Unai Emery, just behind is Alguacil. Javi Gracia is there too, and Olabe and Idiakez. "Football is an expression of life, of who you are," he says. "The education of coaches may be broadly the same but Basque football is different, a manifestation of the people, a culture, a way of being."

New Sevilla boss Mendilibar was born in the Basque town of Zaldibar, right on the Vizcaya-Gipuzkoa border, and has worked at several Basque clubs. He wrote recently of growing up in an environment that valued effort and perseverance. Basque coaches, he said, are "insistent, hard-working, and also a bit stubborn", "direct" and "humble".

There is something in the soil, Etxarri suggests: a culture of working the land, of heavy industry, of physical exercise. Of storytelling too; almost like heroic fables, he suggests. He runs through a list of coaches – Iraola, Emery, Alonso, Alguacil, Arteta – and notes that only the Arsenal manager is from the capital; the rest are from small towns, all within a 25km radius. He talks about Basque football as being "more aggressive, less exquisite perhaps, more like British football," and a culture of "sacrifice and solidarity" seen in traditional sports there: wood chopping, pelota, stone lifting.

Lopetegui's father Jose Antonio was a *harrijasotzailea*, a champion Basque stonelifter who held the record for raising 22 100-kilo cylinders in a minute. His uncle had been a *harrijasotzailea* and his brother Joxean was a professional *pelotari*. Lopetegui had a chance to be professional but was too into football. "My father didn't do football at all, yet growing up with the values he instilled – effort, sacrifice, never seeking excuses – helped forge my character," he says, and those are words that recur. Sport does too.

"Sport here forms part of the process of socialisation, and it is rooted more in participation than technification or specialisation," says Andoni Iraola, a director at Real Sociedad, who shares a name with the Rayo manager. He points out that Gipuzkoa has a top-flight team in handball (men and women), basketball (men and women) and athletics (men and women), and that it hosts the second-biggest popular run in Spain, with more than 30,000 competing annually. This is also the land of cycling. Alguacil's home village of Orio is famous for rowing, something of which he is proud.

That's all part of a culture that values participation, Iraola says, but also one of understanding: this is a place that thinks about sport too.

Influential...Mikel Etxarri holds a team photo featuring Unai Emery, Imanol Alguacil, Javi Gracia, Roberto Olabe and Imanol Idiakez

"We ask ourselves the same question," admits Manu Diaz, the president of the Gipuzkoa football federation, reeling off a list of reasons that might explain so many coaches emerging from so small a pool, ranging from the cultural to the practical.

The Basque Country accounts for just 1.4 per cent of Spain's territory and only 4.6 per cent of its population – but 44 per cent of the coaches in its nine best teams

"The role of coaches is valued highly. Professionals traditionally get involved in coaching youth teams here while they're still playing. The structures in place in Basque football prepare players for retirement: many stay in the game, not just as coaches. And clubs here are faster to turn to homegrown coaches. There's a travelling culture too, which enriches and opens opportunities.

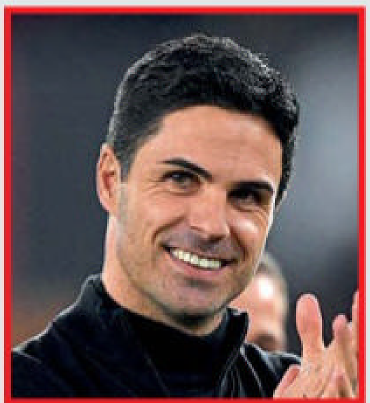
"With a population of just 760,000, only 1.5 per cent of Spain, Gipuzkoa has a team in every level of Spanish football: first division, second division, Primera RFEF, Segunda RFEF, Tercera RFEF. That's a lot of posts to fill," Diaz continues. "Many of the coaches working at Zubieta coached in smaller clubs in the region too, which is to say that opportunity is wide and those clubs become not just a source of player development but coaching development too. This is also the Spanish territory with the highest number of registered players [all ages, all levels] per inhabitant in the country.

"Look at women's football, for example: as a percentage there are twice as many registered players here than in Madrid or Catalonia. In the last two years alone 700 new coaches have gained their licence in Gipuzkoa, 120 of those women. There's tradition and vocation."

"Football here is a religion," Diaz says.

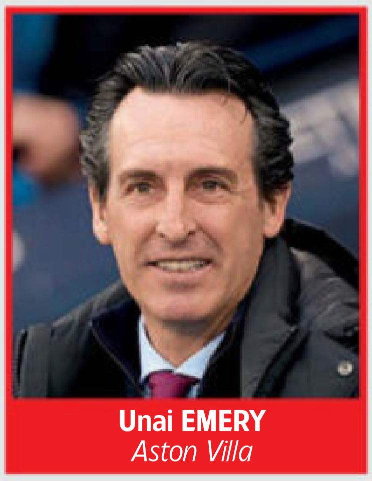
In short, it is part of them; the way they are, a national identity, a collective culture, something shared and savoured. Olabe talks about the Basque concept of *cuadrillas*, groups of lifelong friends. "In San Sebastian you see lots of mad people running, behavioural patterns rooted in effort, commitment. We're the beneficiaries of a sociological system that forges us, builds patience and perseverance," he says. "There are lots of things. Take the *sociedades gastronomicas* [traditional gastronomic societies] where everyone brings an ingredient, cooks together, tidies up together, eats together."

And so there you have it: it really is the *txuleton*.



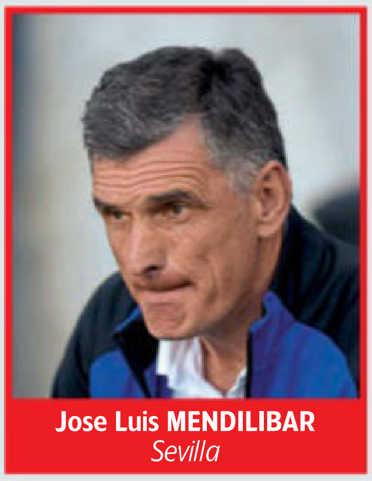
Mikel ARTETA
Arsenal

Julen LOPETEGUI
Wolverhampton Wanderers



Unai EMERY
Aston Villa

Xabi ALONSO
Bayer Leverkusen



Jose Luis MENDILIBAR
Sevilla

MAN WITH A PLAN

Brighton & Hove Albion's impressive form in 2022-23 is the result of well-executed planning – including the appointment of manager Roberto De Zerbi

Words: Sean Cole

When Chelsea tempted Graham Potter away from Brighton in September last year, the Seagulls had one specific candidate in mind to replace him. Forward planning has been vital to the club's success in recent years, and they believed that the charismatic Roberto De Zerbi was the right man to continue their incredible upward trajectory.

His appointment was evidence of Brighton's faith in the structures they've put in place since chairman Tony Bloom took over in 2009, but also hinted at a continued evolution in playing style. Far removed from the old stereotype of the risk-averse, defensively-minded Italian manager, De Zerbi's teams have always been proactive and fearless in possession. They are exciting to watch and typically involved in high-scoring games.

Where Potter was more flexible and reactive, notably tailoring his approach to the opposition, De Zerbi has a steadfast belief in certain key principles. He wants his side to control the rhythm of the game. The ball is kept on the floor as much as possible and moved with purpose. They invite pressure through methodical build-up play at the back before springing into action, exploiting the space that develops to progress quickly up the pitch with incisive combinations.

De Zerbi is unwavering in his commitment to brave, attacking football. Inspired by Marcelo Bielsa and Pep Guardiola, but with a clear vision of his own, he has always looked to take the initiative and play on the front foot, even when faced with much wealthier and more talented opponents. Brighton have dictated terms against Chelsea and Liverpool on his watch, overwhelming both to secure comfortable wins.

Making his mark on the Premier League is just the latest – and most well-publicised – step in an eventful and unconventional journey. De Zerbi was a capable player, who learned his trade in the prestigious Milan youth system, but failed to break into the first team. He went on to have a nomadic career, including a couple of years in Romania with CFR Cluj, before becoming a passionate and idealistic coach.

Since ending his playing career in 2013, De Zerbi has had seven jobs and a wide variety of experiences. There was relegation from Serie D in his first role, with amateur side Darfo Boario, followed by silverware at Foggia as he claimed Italy's cup for third-tier sides, the Coppa Italia Serie C. His record of one win in 13 games saw him sacked by Palermo before he impressed with a doomed Benevento.

The minnows stood out with their daring and energetic style of play, even as they were relegated from Serie A in 2018. On the way to finishing bottom with just 21 points, they secured a couple of famous results against Milan and never stopped trying to play out from the back. De Zerbi's methods were widely praised even in defeat, and he was asked to take over Sassuolo at the end of the season.

Those three seasons with the *Neroverdi* comprise his most complete and influential body of work. De Zerbi transformed them into an attacking force, routinely dominating possession and scoring 69 league goals during his second campaign in charge. Although Sassuolo were often vulnerable defensively, they significantly outperformed their limited budget while providing plenty of entertainment.

Lacking the money to buy ready-made stars, De Zerbi developed his own. Some were already at Sassuolo, while others were clever additions. The profile of players like Jeremie Boga, Manuel Locatelli, Domenico Berardi and Giacomo Raspadori rose in line with their performance levels. The latter three all established themselves in the Italy squad and were part of the unforgettable Euro 2020 triumph.

A coach first and foremost, De Zerbi is a fanatical advocate of hard work on the training ground. He loves being out on the grass, orchestrating sessions. ▶

He is eager to develop individuals and refine their role within the collective. The 43-year-old specialises in working with groups of highly motivated and malleable players, who are always willing to learn. He empowers them to make their own decisions and take responsibility within the parameters he sets.

Enthusiastic and animated, he has an unmistakeable aura around him. Players want to meet his expectations but know how hard that is to do. De Zerbi places huge demands on them and is rarely, if ever, satisfied. Even when Brighton have been at their scintillating best this season, like when they beat Liverpool 3-0 in January, he has insisted that there's much more to come from his team. There's no room for complacency because the bar will always be raised.

This was the case throughout De Zerbi's time at Sassuolo, where his relentless work ethic and obsession with fine details came to the fore. The team were a constant work in progress. They accumulated an increasing number of points in each of his three seasons in charge, twice finishing in the top half and just missing out on a place in Europe shortly before De Zerbi left for Shakhtar Donetsk in 2021.

De Zerbi made a promising start to management outside of Italy. In the first half of the season, Shakhtar won the Ukrainian Super Cup and were on course to regain the title after losing just once in 18 league games. Mykhaylo Mudryk was beginning to shine. Although they crashed out of the Champions League group stage, De Zerbi was reshaping the team in his image and the future looked bright.

But football was quickly forgotten when Russia invaded Ukraine at the start of 2022. The league was paused, and eventually cancelled, as a fight for survival took precedence. Players, officials and their families, many a long way from home – especially Shakhtar's large Brazilian contingent – scrambled to escape a terrifying situation. De Zerbi was calm and compassionate under intense pressure, refusing to leave their base in Kyiv until his international players had been safely evacuated.

As the conflict continued, fear and uncertainty prevailed. In July, De Zerbi officially stepped down as manager. Just over two months later, he was approached about the Brighton vacancy after Potter's surprise departure. An unorthodox selection by a club that prides itself on doing things differently, he's proved to be the perfect fit for their ethos and ambitions.

The profile of their squad suits De Zerbi's vision of dynamic attacking football. The Seagulls have lots of young, driven, adaptable and tactically aware players. They have been recruited from an eclectic mix of countries – Japan, Argentina, Germany, Ecuador, Spain, Paraguay and the Netherlands – and effectively forged into a coherent whole. He believes in them and their capacity to improve.

De Zerbi's clear convictions have stood out in a season of unwanted disruption for Brighton. After winning four of their first six league games in 2022-23 under Potter, supporters were worried about seeing that great start derailed when he departed. Despite an excellent showing in the new manager's first game – a thrilling 3-3 draw with Liverpool at Anfield – that concern seemed justified as they took just one point from the next 12 available.

But Brighton never panicked. Patience and stability have underpinned their rise. They believe in giving managers time and the tools they need to be successful on a long-term basis, as shown by the four-year contract De Zerbi signed on his arrival. Having the right people, systems and processes in place matters more to them than the vagaries of immediate results.

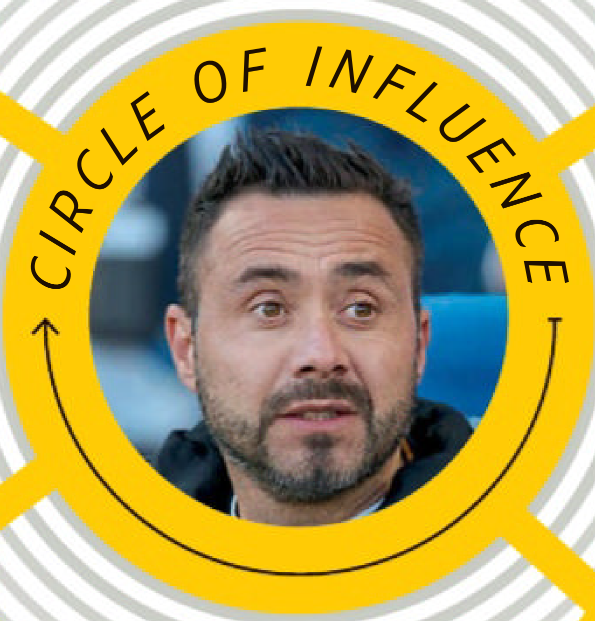
Fittingly, and cathartically, the first victory of the De Zerbi era arrived at home to his predecessor's new team. Chelsea were blown away by a vibrant performance from the Seagulls to secure a deserved 4-1 win. Their energy, tempo and tenacity simply couldn't be contained. It was the perfect example of De Zerbi's ideas in action.

Brighton have continued to flourish since returning from the World Cup

Underdogs...De Zerbi impressed during his time with relegated Benevento

> De Zerbi was approached about the Brighton vacancy after Potter's surprise departure. An unorthodox selection by a club that prides itself on doing things differently, he's proved to be the perfect fit for their ethos and ambitions

Rubbing shoulders ...De Zerbi took on some of Italy's biggest names during his time in Serie A



PEP GUARDIOLA

"Pep is the best coach of all time, because he marked the evolution of football," De Zerbi once said of Guardiola, "but that doesn't mean I am copying him now." While their approaches – and budgets – are not identical, De Zerbi is similarly committed to Guardiola's view that dominating possession is the best route to success, and went to visit Guardiola at Bayern Munich to observe his methods up close. "We speak often, especially as he played in my hometown club Brescia," said the Italian of his idol, whom he consulted before his appointment at Brighton.

PASQUALE MARINO

Marino has worked at 18 different Italian clubs, from Serie D to Serie A, in a 26-year managerial career. And in all that time, only three players have played more games for him than De Zerbi. The Brighton boss played under Marino at three different clubs – Foggia, Arezzo and Catania – and says that he learned a lot under him, including his attacking style of play.

MARCELO BIELSA

Like Bielsa, De Zerbi is a student of the game, dedicated to the point of obsession. After being sacked by Palermo in 2016, during a period of reflection, he contacted the Argentine manager in search of help. Bielsa, who was then in charge of Lille, invited De Zerbi and his staff to spend a week observing the club's training sessions, which provided some fresh ideas as well as strengthening his belief in humility, hard work and high-tempo football.

ZDENEK ZEMAN

The chain-smoking Czech manager is a revolutionary figure in Italian football, famed for his non-conformist outlook and courageous 4-3-3 formation. Arguably his greatest achievements came during his second spell in charge at Foggia, one of De Zerbi's former clubs, when he led them to two promotions and the cusp of Europe with a swashbuckling style of play, launching Giuseppe Signori's career to new heights in the process. De Zerbi shares Zeman's maverick tendencies.

break. Teenage striker Evan Ferguson has taken on a much more prominent role and De Zerbi has brought the best out of Kaoru Mitoma by putting faith in his unique dribbling ability. The squad's experienced players have been left enthused by his influence too, with Adam Lallana praising De Zerbi as "the most hands-on coach I've ever worked with." High praise indeed from a man that has played for Mauricio Pochettino and Jurgen Klopp.

There have been challenges along the way. De Zerbi arrived with limited English but has embraced his new surroundings and learned quickly. January might have derailed their progress, as Leandro Trossard left for Arsenal and influential midfielder Moises Caicedo had his head turned by the Gunners. But De Zerbi was firm yet understanding. The two delicate situations were handled well by a club that operates in the transfer market with supreme confidence, and Caicedo has now signed a new long-term contract tying him to the club until 2027.

History is now in Brighton's grasp. The Seagulls are on course for their highest-ever finish and could qualify for European competition for the first time. While a clear identity and data-driven approach have transformed the club's standing in world football, their toughest test could be convincing De Zerbi to stay with the project. His reputation continues to grow and he has already been linked with a return to Milan.

Champions League ...De Zerbi took on Real Madrid and Internazionale with Shakhtar Donetsk

OSMAN BUKARI

"I'm happy at Red Star Belgrade and looking forward to playing in the Champions League"

The Red Star Belgrade and Ghana winger has had his ups and downs, but it seems the best is yet to come

Tell us about your childhood in Ghana and the beginnings of your football career.
I had a happy childhood. When I was little, I ran after the ball with my older brothers and with kids from our neighbourhood. Afterwards in school we played a lot of football and there were friendly matches against other schools. I was selected in the school team, scouts spotted me and I joined a football academy. But later when I saw that many players, for example Under-17 internationals, were picked from senior school teams, I decided to return to the school team. It was only when I was 17 that I started playing for Accra Lions, who were in the second division back then.

Which football players were your idols at that time?
Of course, I liked Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo very much, but my idol was Eden Hazard. I really admired his style of play, I watched all of Chelsea's games and I wanted to play like him. At that time I even had the nickname "Hazard"!

At the age of 19 you joined Anderlecht. Why didn't it work out there?
Actually I went to Anderlecht's youth team on loan from Accra for half a season with an option that they could sign me after that. But in the meantime an offer from AS Trencin arrived, and in the summer of 2018 I signed with them. It turned out to be a good move. It was my first season in professional football and I enjoyed my time in Slovakia. I stayed there for another year and then I signed with Gent. I stayed one year with Gent and one season on loan at Nantes. Finally, last summer I signed with Red Star Belgrade.

The Serbian league is among the poorer leagues in Europe, but Red Star Belgrade regularly play in the Champions League or Europa League. Was that one of the main reasons why you joined them?
When the offer from Red Star arrived, I talked to my agent and also to Richmond Boakye [Ghana striker who also played for Red Star] and I decided that it was a good move. It's a great club and I knew that I would get the opportunity to play Champions League or Europa League and that was a big motive, because at the clubs where I was before it was uncertain whether there would be a chance to play in Europe. I don't think that joining Red Star Belgrade was a step back, because from there I believe that one day I'll get the chance to move to a club in a top league.

Obviously you are a very quick player. Do you know what your top speed is during a game?
I'm not sure if I remember the accurate data, but I think it was 34 km/h.

What specific aspects of your game would you like to improve?
I know that I must work on my finishing and also on quicker decision-making.

Who is your favourite current player in world football that plays in your position?
Vinicius Junior.

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Europa League... Bukari reacts during Red Star's clash against Monaco

Last summer in the 5-0 Champions League qualifying win against Pyunik, you scored three goals and got one assist. The fans chanted your name and gave you a standing ovation, even though it was one of your first matches for Red Star. Was that the best game of your career so far?
Those are really nice memories. Red Star have amazing fans. It was the first time that fans chanted my name – if I don't count my time as youngster in Ghana. Boakye told me about the Red Star fans before I signed and he was totally right. Of course I was happy with my performance in that game, but my best game so far was when I was with Nantes. In February last year we played a league game at home against PSG, we won 3-1, I was in the starting line-up and I got one assist.

> "I admire Cristiano Ronaldo and I would never make fun of him. Who am I to do such a thing?"

You are already in Red Star's history books as the last player to wear the No.11 shirt, after the club decided to retire the number in honour of club legend Dragan Dzajic.
Yes, I was told that I'm allowed to keep my No.11 until the end of this season. It's my favourite shirt number, so I must try to make the most of it until then! Of course, it makes me proud to wear the same number as Dzajic and it was an honour when I met him at the club. I heard that he was a great player and I also watched some old footage from the time when he was a left-winger with Red Star Belgrade and Yugoslavia.

Soon after the Pyunik game, you scored that spectacular goal against Partizan in your first "Eternal Derby".
Yes, it was an amazing goal. Such a goal you score maybe only once in your career. To be honest, when the ball came to me I didn't plan to shoot, to take it on the volley, but intuitively I hit the ball and, when I hit it, I didn't believe that it would go in like this.

Afterwards, in September and October, you were not always in the starting line-up. What happened?
Unfortunately my form dropped in that period. I guess it had to do with two things: first with the coach change [Dejan Stankovic was replaced by Milos Milojevic after failing to qualify for the Champions League], and also because my head was already in Qatar. I knew that I would be in Ghana's squad and probably in my subconscious I was worried that I might pick up an injury before the World Cup. Because of that I was not focused enough on delivering my performance.

What did you think of Ghana's performances at the World Cup?
We had a young team and I think that our World Cup campaign was okay. However, we could have and should have achieved more. I think we deserved more. I would say that our performances were better than the results.

Are you happy with the playing time you got in Qatar, or did you expect more?
To be honest, I knew that I would not be in the first XI and therefore I'm quite happy with the playing time that I got.

Why did you celebrate your goal against Portugal in the style of Cristiano Ronaldo? Some people saw it as a provocation.
I admire Cristiano Ronaldo and I would never make fun of him. Who am I to do such a thing? It was the first time in my life that I saw him, and it was an honour for me to be on the pitch with him. I don't know how and why, but it just happened. It was spontaneous. With hindsight I know that I should have quickly picked up the ball and run back to the halfway line [Bukari's goal in the 89th minute left Ghana 3-2 behind], but in that moment of joy, scoring at the World Cup, it just happened.

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Best game...Bukari takes on Neymar and PSG during his loan spell at Nantes

What are your personal and team goals for the rest of the 2022-23 season?
I want to continue to give my best for the team, to help Red Star Belgrade win the league title and cup, and then to prepare for the Champions League [Serbia's league champions will qualify automatically for next season's group stage for the first time].

Where do you see yourself in five years?
I have a contract until 2026, but in football you never know what will happen. In any case I'm happy at Red Star Belgrade and I'm looking forward to playing in the Champions League for the first time. But my goal is one day to play for a club in one of the top five European leagues.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Face to face... Bukari with a copy of *World Soccer*
Credit: Anita Novak

World Cup goal ...Bukari imitates Cristiano Ronaldo's iconic celebration after scoring against Portugal in Qatar

ARMANDO BROJA

"We have the talent to take Albania to the World Cup"

The Chelsea and Albania striker speaks to *World Soccer* on his rehab from a ruptured ACL and the future of the national team under new boss Sylvinho

How is your recovery going after rupturing your ACL at the end of last year?
I am recovering a lot quicker than expected. Being able to get back in the gym and work on my strength has been a comfort for me after being restricted to exercises in bed and on the massage table over the first few weeks after surgery. That was the toughest period. I was bed-bound for around six weeks and unable to do anything really, so I am happy I am through that stage. Running and changing direction will come over the next months, which I am working towards now, but we are being very careful not to rush things.

What does your day-to-day at Cobham consist of during rehabilitation?
We are doing a lot of quadricep activation work – strengthening the glutes and legs. I lost a lot of muscle in both of my legs due to inactivity after surgery, around eight or nine kilograms, so we are building that back slowly. I am doing lots of swimming, bike work and strength and conditioning, as well as some balance work in the sand pit – it's all very tiring and hard work but we are seeing the improvements, which is a great feeling. The plan is to return at the start of next season but things are looking very positive and ahead of schedule.

Chelsea have made a lot of new signings this season. How has everyone settled in?
There are a lot of new faces for sure. But they all seem like lovely guys and have settled in quickly. It's been a big change at the club in all areas and it's, of course, going to take time to bed in and get everyone on the same path moving forwards. It's important to add quality to the squad and activate that competition for places. You need that to succeed as one of the top clubs, having two or three world-class players in each position to push everyone to the maximum of their potential, and we have that now. I am sure we will see the improvements sooner rather than later if we all stick together.

You signed a six-year contract with the club at the start of the season. Do you feel that you are being trusted as a key cog in Chelsea's future?
Definitely. That seems to be the philosophy of the new ownership, to plan for the future, and it's a massive honour that I have been trusted to be an important part of it. I have been backed to perform for the club and now it's down to me to repay that trust. Once I am back from injury this is my biggest short-term goal, to prove that, and I am going to have to take every opportunity that comes my way.

You enjoyed two successful loan spells at Vitesse and Southampton. What did you learn most at each club?
My time at Vitesse underlined the step up from academy football to senior football and it was clear of the gulf between the two. I needed to adapt my mindset and approach straightaway. They were all professionals – they ate properly, trained 100 per cent and pushed each other in the gym all the time, and so much more was expected of you as a player than in academy football.

Southampton was amazing for me and it showed me an even bigger leap from the Dutch league to the Premier League. On the pitch everything is faster, more physical and more challenging. It was important for me to

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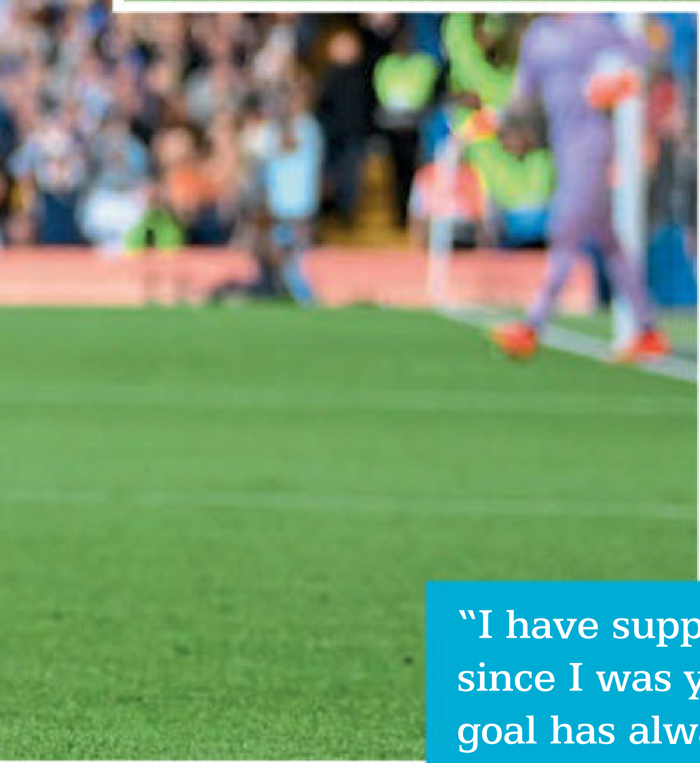
Landmark moment... Broja celebrates scoring his first Chelsea goal against Wolves

Loan spell...Broja scored ten goals in 30 Eredivisie games for Vitesse in the 2020-21 season

hit the ground running – and I was successful – but you notice the difference in playing against some of the best teams and players in the world each week. But I always knew that I wanted to return to Chelsea afterwards. I have supported the club since I was young and my goal has always been to succeed at Chelsea.

Who were your footballing heroes growing up?
There have always been two for me: Cristiano Ronaldo and R9 [Ronaldo]. Every kid wanted to be like Cristiano Ronaldo when I was growing up. He's such an amazing player and someone that I have always been inspired to try to emulate. I feel like I have some natural similar abilities to him and watching him always makes me think of additions that I can make to my own game. But R9 was the biggest influence. I never got to watch him play live but my Dad would always show me clips of him play and tell me all about him. My Dad wanted me



Toughened up… Broja spent last season on loan at Southampton

> "I have supported the club since I was young and my goal has always been to succeed at Chelsea"

to be the kind of striker that Ronaldo was – his skills, goals, touch – he was the complete striker. He had a left foot, a right foot, speed, strength, finishing and could link the play. I would spend ages watching YouTube videos of him playing like a beast.

You grew up in Slough to Albanian parents. How much of an influence have they and your Albanian heritage been on your life?
It was tough for them when they moved over but they have always set out to do anything they can to give me and my two sisters the best chance in life, which I am eternally grateful for. They would make sure I never missed school or a training session and pushed us to be the best versions of ourselves. Because of them I have a huge love and respect for Albania and its people. It was such an honour for me to make my debut for the national side in 2020 and it felt like I was repaying my parents for everything they sacrificed to make sure I made it in football. They were lost for words watching me for the first time and it was amazing to see them smiling in the stands.

Former Brazil, Arsenal and Manchester City left-back Sylvinho has recently taken over as Albania's manager. Have you spoken with him about his plans?
Yes, we have spoken a couple of times and he came over to England to see me. He is a very good guy and has a clear, straightforward vision on where he wants to take the team. It's very encouraging. He shares my ambition of getting to a World Cup and the Euros with Albania but we are under no illusions that it will, of course, take time. Like Chelsea, it takes patience to get everyone on the same page when there are changes in the dressing room but I have no doubt that Sylvinho will have a big, positive influence on the team.

There is some exciting talent coming through into the Albania first team with the likes of you, Kristjan Asllani, Marash Kumbulla and Nedim Bajrami. What is it like being a key part of this project?
It's very exciting being involved with some very special young players. But what is also important is the experience we have in the side as well, which acts as a good blend. It's about getting everyone on the same page and Sylvinho – alongside his assistant Pablo Zabaleta – understand that. I have no doubt that the talent is there and for me to be a part of it is a true honour. We saw what Morocco did at the World Cup and believe there is no reason why we as a group can't emulate that in the future. We have the talent to take Albania to the World Cup for the first time in its history.

What are some of your biggest goals to achieve in football?
I have always believed in aiming high and having the biggest targets to shoot towards. There is no point in settling for low targets that will be easily achieved. As a team I would love to help Albania reach a World Cup and as a club player winning the Champions League is the ultimate goal. On a personal level, I have always dreamed of winning the Ballon d'Or. Everyone thinks that that would be a crazy achievement but I would never rule it out if I continue to stay level-headed and work hard. Of course, I need to develop and progress further, but I have no doubt that it is in my hands to achieve such an accolade. ”

Interview by Lewis Watson

Albania ace…Broja has scored four goals in 17 games for his country

Facetoface

MIRCEA LUCESCU

“Sometimes, air alerts can be heard. Players gather in a bunker and wait…”

Dynamo Kyiv’s legendary manager describes life in Ukraine since Russia’s invasion

You will turn 78 in July, you are the second-most decorated manager in the history of football after Sir Alex Ferguson. Still, you have chosen to stay on as Dynamo Kyiv’s head coach despite the Russian invasion when almost every foreigner was fleeing the country. What drives you?

When I saw everyone leaving I decided to stay. I couldn’t leave the club like this. After the first bombings, I immediately tried to do my best to help. I organised buses for the players’ families to cross the border to Romania, I made efforts to get the players out of the country so they could send a strong message for peace. I tried to persuade the authorities – the football association, the minister of sports – to allow the players to go abroad and play to send their message of unity, solidarity and peace. Everyone was scared; nobody knew how this would continue.

I left for Romania a few days after the invasion and thanks to some wonderful people we could organise things for the players’ families. They also came to Romania after a while, we trained there, then we toured Europe. It was hard to get an official approval for a friendly tournament, but everyone finally understood that it was a vital thing. The [Ukrainian] national team also needed to get ready to play Scotland and Wales in the World Cup play-offs and this also needed to be taken into consideration. We made a request, Shakhtar soon followed. Our tour was longer, with more games, including against Dortmund, Everton and Lyon.

It would have been easy to leave, but someone needed to get this team together. I just couldn’t [leave], my heart wouldn’t let me do it. I felt someone should gather the boys around him and I chose to be that person. I wanted the players to be with someone they could trust. I stayed and hoped the war would stop. I couldn’t imagine what times would follow for our team.

How has the team been since last summer?

The tournament for peace went well. The Champions League qualifiers were good, we kept Fenerbahce and Sturm Graz out, then Benfica eliminated us. That’s when we fell a bit behind. We’d be constantly on the bus for eight or nine hours a day, then on the plane from Poland to play in the Europa League, then again to Poland and on the bus to Ukraine. If you get to see the goals we conceded… we basically passed opponents the ball. That only happens when your brain is not paying attention to the game. And who can blame the players? It was extremely difficult for them. We started the league very badly.

We had several problems because of the long bus rides. When we settled in Ukraine and the European games were over, we started to climb back up in the league. It's hard for someone to understand what this team has been through. And the players...I can't even imagine! They treated the game in extraordinary fashion and they deserve big respect. But moments like those we've been through can ruin everything on the pitch.

After we moved back to our training camp in Kyiv, our results got better. During training, sometimes, air alerts can be heard. Players gather in a bunker and wait. We had to interrupt a few sessions. It even happened during games. We had to stop and wait for an hour before it was safe to get out again. Under such circumstances, there's not much you can do. Credit to my boys for what they did over the past year. Now we are ready to return and hope for the best.

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Match for peace...Dynamo Kyiv's players line up ahead of last year's friendly with Legia Warsaw

> "We are trying to keep football alive in Ukraine because football is life"

How does it feel to have training interrupted by air raid sirens?
I'm not scared when I hear the alarm, I've been through too many things in my life. In 2014, when the conflict started in Donbass, I was working at Shakhtar. The team was in a fantastic moment back then, the city was expanding as well. We were playing in a brand new five-star stadium. It happened then as well: we were living on a plane, we were always on the road. Now, we basically live on the bus. It would have been easy for me to say "goodbye", but it's not my type to leave things unfinished. We are trying to keep football alive in Ukraine because football is life.

How have the players been affected?
When they are with me, they try to focus. But after they finish training, they are immediately connected to what's happening with the war. I totally understand them. Their only chance not to fall into depression is to keep going, to perform on the pitch as well as they can. Any upset only drags them behind.

Decorated...Lucescu famously won the UEFA Cup with Shakhtar Donetsk in 2009

We are trying to keep them at a decent level. I try to find out what happens to each of them and their families. Some are going through tough times, some have their wives about to give birth. They aren't together, it's not easy. Not all of the players could get their families back to Ukraine. Even our captain [Serhiy Sydorchuk] has his family in Warsaw, he has four children. His last one was born in Bucharest last year.

The only thing that preoccupies the players is protecting their families. The difference is enormous in what I see them doing, in their behaviour and habits compared to before the war started. The invasion basically cut through their lives. Now they are only focused to survive, to keep performing as much as they can. Apart from what they're living at home and their football life, nothing's where it used to be anymore.

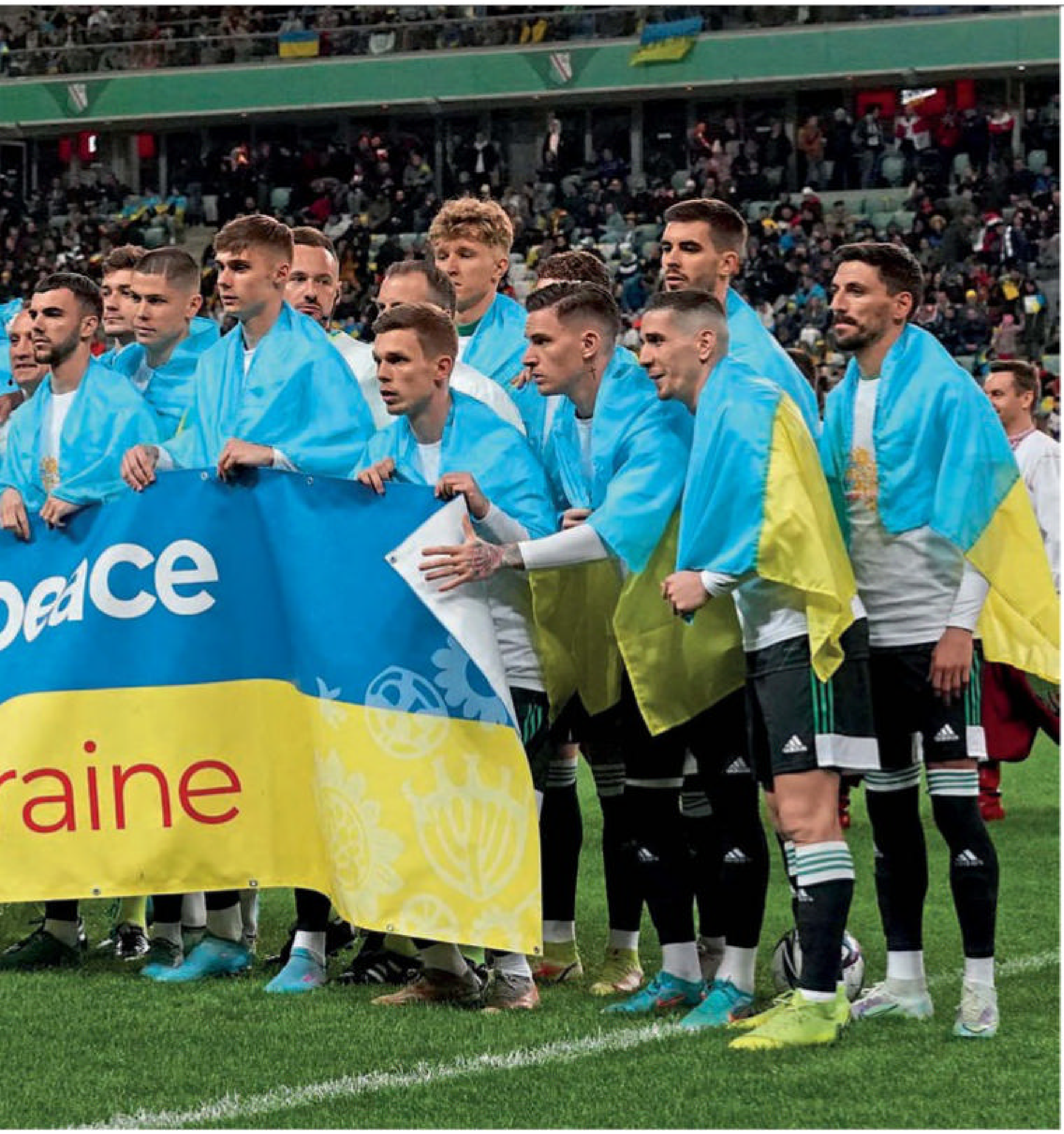
And what about you?
I live in the team's training camp. It's where I've been since I joined Dynamo almost three years ago. I don't know when the war will stop, it's something that's way outside of our control. We just suffer the consequences of other people's decisions.

I tried to get the world to pay attention to what was happening to Ukraine through the tournament for peace. But almost a year has passed, and people abroad don't look at news regarding the war in Ukraine as they did last spring. But with time going by and the situation in Ukraine unchanged, the mental impact is worse and worse. My players, for example, are young. They had their aspirations, their goals. That's fading, they have questions regarding their future now. And that's the worst part, to stop believing and hoping. Maybe that's what I'm here for as well: to show them I have hope and I believe in the future despite my age. I chose to be among them, to guide them, because I believe in them. I want to show them that life can still go on.

I wanted the tournament for peace to be played in big stadiums so the Ukrainian refugees could attend. I wanted them not to feel abandoned, I wanted Ukrainians all over Europe to get together, to feel united and valued.

Watching news doesn't help me at all. I'm being informed about the big stories, of course. Everything the media reports should let people know how dirty, how disgusting and odious this war is. These images about the atrocities on the front lead to depression. That's what I'm trying to avoid with my players: depression.

Do your players ever smile?
They do, but it's mainly related to games. During the game, during training when there's something funny. That's when they forget



about what is happening a few kilometres away. But that's pretty much it, as the impact with reality is abrupt.

One player that has left Ukraine is Mykhaylo Mudryk. How highly do you rate Chelsea's new signing?

He has fantastic qualities, and sensational speed. Two years ago he was playing for Desna on loan, but his progress at Shakhtar has been huge. He was frail physically, but he changed a lot. He worked on his personal and body development. I think he won Shakhtar half their points this season through what he did on the pitch. Why wouldn't he be worth his transfer fee? If you look at similar players for which huge amounts of money have been paid, he's up there with them. He resembles Mbappe, I could say he's a copy of Kylian in terms of style. I'm also curious about what will happen to him. He'll need time to adapt, but I think he will make it in England. He has extraordinary qualities. He also performed very well in the Champions League. He is an extremely talented player.

What does football mean and represent to Ukraine right now?

Hope. Ukrainians love football. They have plenty of players of great value. Football is a way of discovering Ukraine to the world. Even now, players wear the flag on their shoulders when coming out for matches. They sing the anthem before matches. The atmosphere of togetherness is doing them good. Even though matches are played without fans in the stands, the talks around matches are still there. There are still post-match shows, people are interested in the results and debates. You need to take care of one's feelings as well. Love, enthusiasm, hope, disillusion, hate... everything that football offers is basically life. A glimpse of normality. If football dies, it's going to be even harder for people.

I want my team to challenge for the title this season. If you're not after something big, then why not stop playing? We can't talk about pressure for the results given our situation off the pitch. Conditions are not normal. Games need to finish before sunset, they can be interrupted by alarms. We are trying to keep football and the competition alive, we want people to still be interested in football and feel the connection with their teams and players when all this will be over. We knew the rules before the season started, we knew what was about to happen.

Interview by Emanuel Rosu

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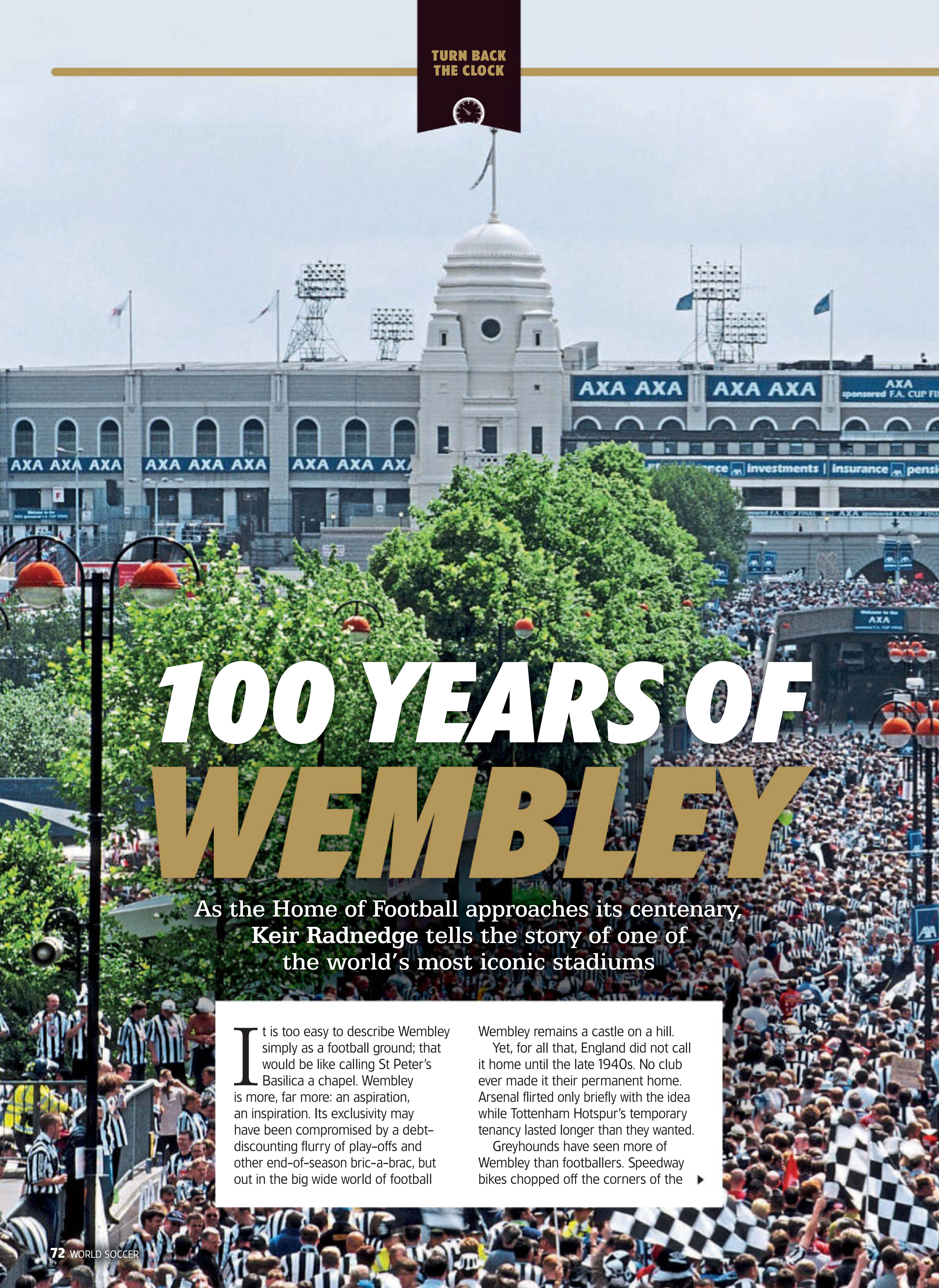
Bouncing back...Lucescu and his players after beating Fenerbahce in Champions League qualifying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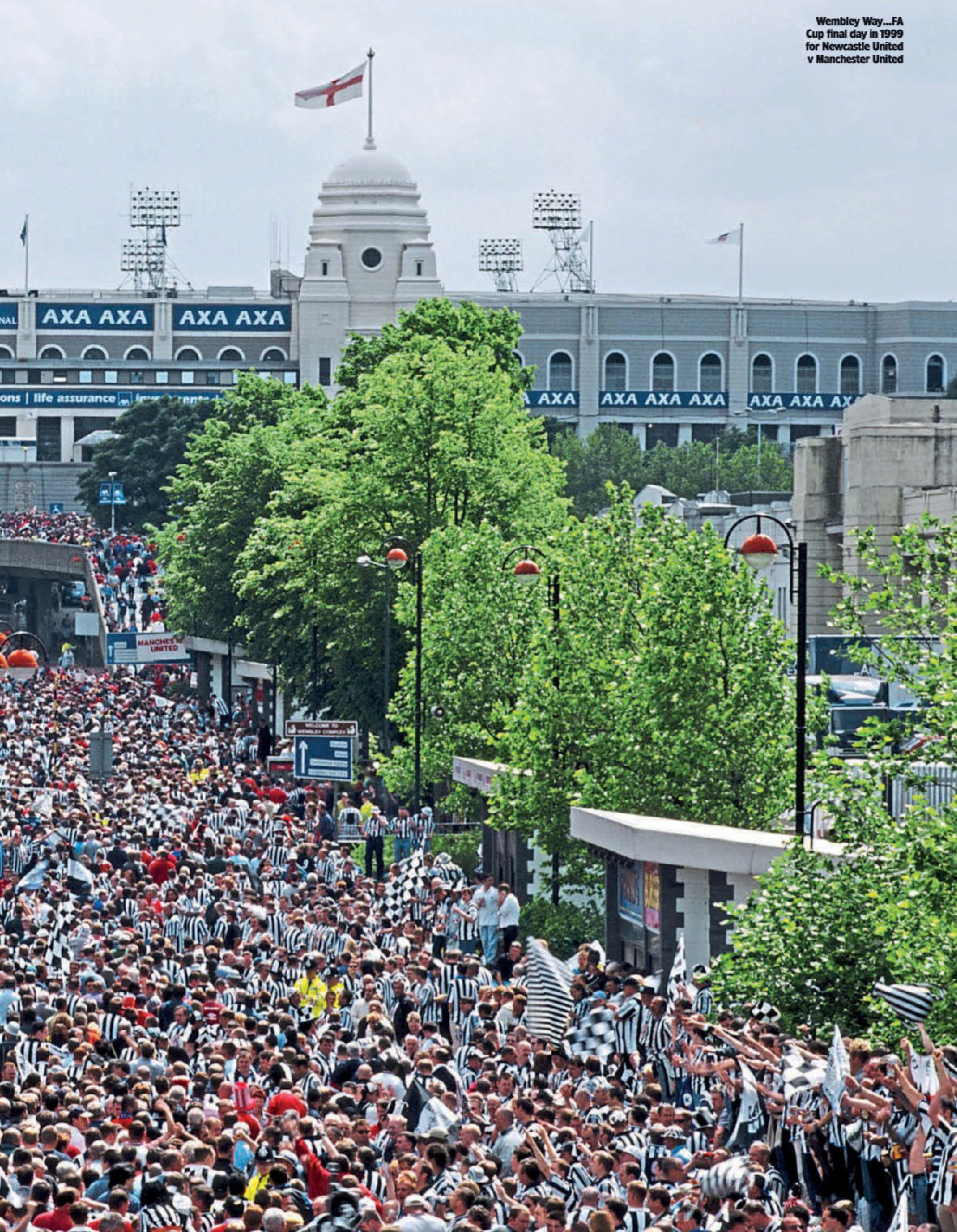
100 YEARS OF WEMBLEY

As the Home of Football approaches its centenary, **Keir Radnedge** tells the story of one of the world's most iconic stadiums

It is too easy to describe Wembley simply as a football ground; that would be like calling St Peter's Basilica a chapel. Wembley is more, far more: an aspiration, an inspiration. Its exclusivity may have been compromised by a debt-discounting flurry of play-offs and other end-of-season bric-a-brac, but out in the big wide world of football Wembley remains a castle on a hill.

Yet, for all that, England did not call it home until the late 1940s. No club ever made it their permanent home. Arsenal flirted only briefly with the idea while Tottenham Hotspur's temporary tenancy lasted longer than they wanted.

Greyhounds have seen more of Wembley than footballers. Speedway bikes chopped off the corners of the ▸



Wembley Way...FA Cup final day in 1999 for Newcastle United v Manchester United

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WELCOME TO WEMBLEY COMPLEX

pitch while rugby codes, pop stars, boxers, evangelists, gridiron giants, stock car racers and, infamously, horse-riding showjumpers all take their turn. The Olympic Games, too: main venue in 1948 and summoned for duty again in 2012.

But it is the romance of football which has lifted Wembley to iconic status and, for all the sporting drama of the past century, it owes most to the FA Cup final – and to the inaugural final above all. That opening event has been chaotically sealed in not merely the cold print of history books but in legend, in the soul of the game.

Wembley had been built not for football but for the Empire Exhibition of 1924. The Empire Stadium – its original name – was thrown together in 300 days at a cost of £750,000. A troop of soldiers tramped up and down the terracing to ensure it was safe to open only four days before the 1923 FA Cup final.

The FA Cup was already a well-established institution, 52 years old and counting. West Ham United and Bolton Wanderers provided appropriate rivals for the occasion: South v North, London v Lancashire, capital self-confidence v regional pride.

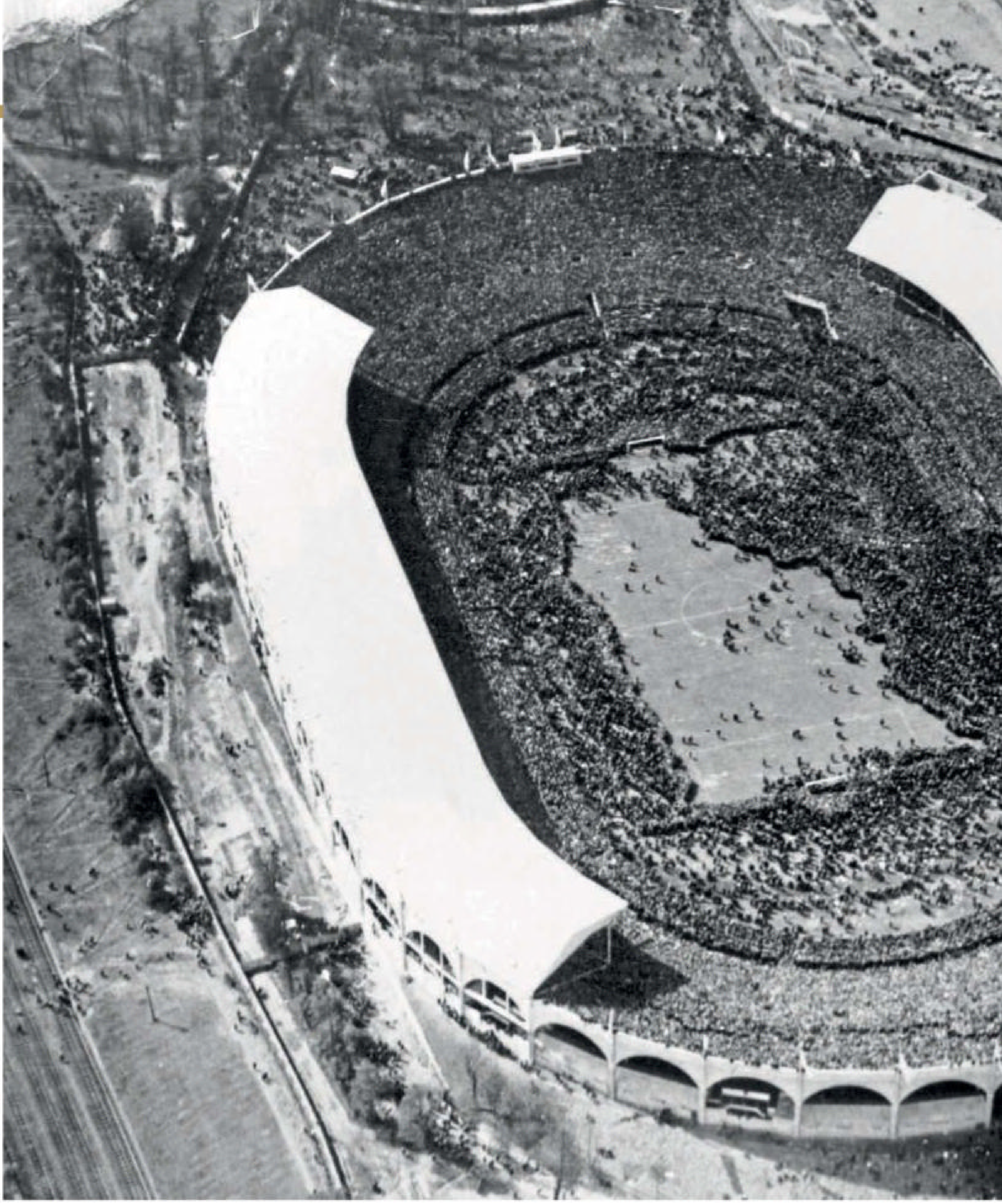
Fans, for the one and only time, could walk up on the day. Perhaps 200,000 did, double the number anticipated, hence the spillage onto the pitch and a pushback by mounted police including Constable George Scorey on his famed white horse, Billie. Almost lost in the fervour, Bolton won 2-0. The historic first goal was scored by England inside-forward David Jack.

Wembley brought extra lustre to the FA Cup final, the grandeur of a national occasion. Royal patronage too. King George V had cut the first turf and Queen Mary chose her favourite hymn, "Abide With Me", for the pre-match community singing in 1927. The hymn has survived its occasional mangling by tone-deaf performers.

An interlocking tradition of Wembley and the FA Cup has been broken only by war and the seven-year hiatus of rebuilding between 2000 and 2007.

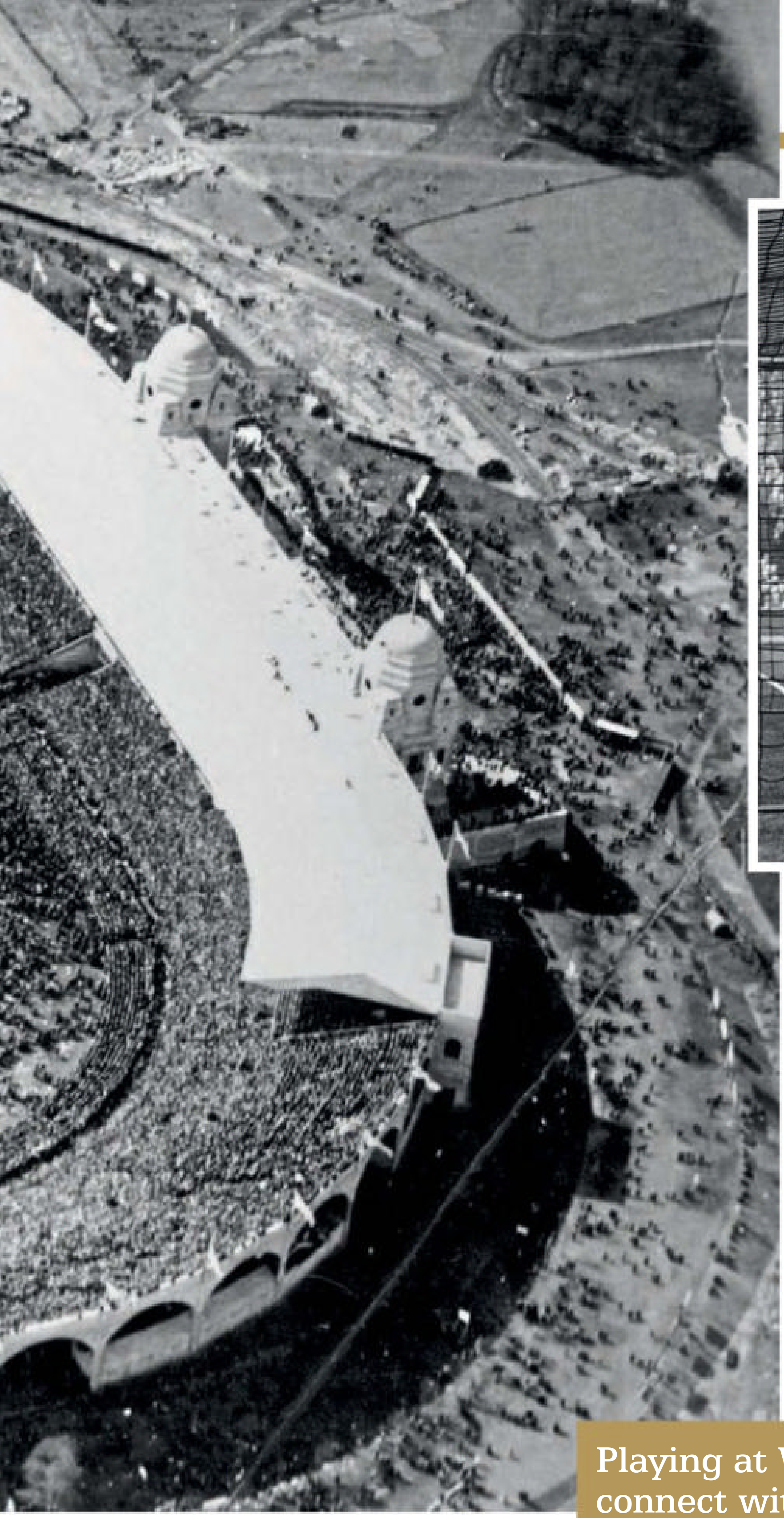
The cup final convention was founded on early stand-out moments: 1927 saw the first and only Welsh success with Cardiff City beating favourites Arsenal thanks to a mistake by the Gunners' Welsh goalkeeper Dan Lewis; in 1933 teams wore shirt numbers for the first time, Everton with 1-11 and Manchester City 12-22; in 1938 George Mutch marked television's arrival by scoring a penalty in the last minute of extra-time to secure Preston North End's 1-0 win over Huddersfield Town – a reversal of the scoreline of the 1922 final, the last before the opening of Wembley, when Huddersfield had won the first-ever final decided by a penalty kick.

One year after its chaotic opening, Wembley had welcomed international football with England and Scotland drawing 1-1. The oldest clash of all



The "White Horse Final"...an aerial view of the 1923 FA Cup final

Historic...George Mutch of Preston North End scores the first-ever televised FA Cup final penalty, in 1938 against Huddersfield Town



internationals was staged every other year, seven times in all at Wembley between 1924 and 1939. Most redolent was the emphatic 5-1 victory in 1928 by Scotland's "Wembley Wizards".

No-one else. England matches were not considered a big enough "draw", even by the Football Association. Hence the 4-3 winning thriller against Hugo Meisl and Matthias Sindelar's *Wunderteam* in 1932 was played at Stamford Bridge, Arsenal hosted the rugged 3-2 win over newly-crowned world champions Italy in autumn 1934 and a year later it was Tottenham that hosted the politically delicate 2-0 win over Germany.

Shattering defeat...Ferenc Puskas celebrates during Hungary's 6-3 thrashing of England in 1953

The Second World War saw Wembley stage cup finals and internationals for the Red Cross and other charities and provide a temporary home for refugees. It also staged two "Victory International" tournaments before the FA Cup final returned in 1946 and England took up what would become a near-permanent residence with another 1-1 draw against Scotland in 1947.

Hence the proud illusion of Wembley invincibility against continental opposition – destroyed by Ferenc Puskas' Hungary in 1953 – rested on a sequence of only three internationals against non-British and Irish teams.

The shattering 6-3 defeat imposed by the Magical Magyars has assumed, down the years, ever-greater significance as a symbol of England's fading powers on both the international sporting and political stage. Yet a second Wembley defeat, to Agne Simonsson's Sweden in 1959, was a precursor to a demonstration of lessons learned, in football at least.

> Playing at Wembley represented the opportunity to connect with the game's history by treading one of its great stages. Only the Maracana, in Rio de Janeiro, comes anywhere close in footballing mythology

First European Cup final...Milan captain Cesare Maldini lifts the trophy in 1963

A year later England manager Walter Winterbottom introduced a 4-2-4 system with Bobby Robson and Johnny Haynes as midfield pivots. A run of four matches generated 26 goals and only six against, starting with a 4-2 Wembley win over Spain. The visitors included Alfredo Di Stefano, Paco Gento and Jose Santamaria among six players who had been lauded only six months earlier for Real Madrid's fifth successive European Cup triumph.

Six years later Wembley took centre stage for England's only hosting of the World Cup. The aura of invincibility was restored, temporarily at least.

Alf Ramsey, Winterbottom's successor, capitalised on the home advantage of all six games at Wembley including the bitter quarter-final duel with Argentina, the fair-play semi-final against Portugal – no whistle for a foul until the 28th minute – and the ultimate glory of success in extra-time against West Germany.

The celebratory images assured Wembley of photographic immortality through every successive reproduction of those images of Bobby Moore, Bobby Charlton, Nobby Stiles and even Soviet linesman Tofiq Bahramov. "*Wembley-Tor*" remains a popular German shorthand for controversy, bad luck, refereeing incompetence, cruel sporting fate, etc.

Regret that he never played at Wembley remained with Pele to his dying day. Not only him. Michel Platini, too. When tenants Tottenham drew Real Madrid in the Champions League a wistful smile was raised by director

Wembley 2.0...an aerial view of the rebuilt ground

Emilio Butragueno as he told me: “So we get to play at Wembley... you know, I never did.”

For footballers the world over, playing at Wembley represented the opportunity to connect with the game’s history by treading one of its great stages. Only the Maracana, in Rio de Janeiro, comes anywhere close in footballing mythology.

By 1966 football’s role in the national psyche was evolving with the revolutionary advance of Europe’s pioneering international club competitions. Wembley’s debut as a final host was Milan’s 2-1 defeat of Benfica in the 1963 European Cup final. Two years later West Ham beat 1860 Munich in the Cup Winners’ Cup.

To date Wembley has staged a record seven European Cup/Champions League finals (with the eighth to come in 2024) plus two in the European Championship and two in the now defunct Cup Winners’ Cup.

The lustre survived an ownership roller-coaster until an acquisition, demolition and rebuilding in the early 2000s. Public debate swirled around the ever-escalating cost (£798 million), the destruction of the famous twin towers (probably sited around Row 23 in the new main stand) and even whether a national stadium should be in London at all.

Rebuilding was long overdue. Simon Inglis, in his seminal book *The Football Grounds of Europe*, decried Wembley even in 1990 as “a national disgrace – decaying, uncomfortable and dingy.”

The new Wembley is far from perfect; the lower-placed fans’ view is an immeasurable improvement on the old, hopelessly shallow terracing, but the approaches are miserable.

Originally the FA might have bought much of the surrounding land but,

Iconic...England’s Bobby Moore kisses the 1966 World Cup trophy

deafened by howls of criticism over escalating costs, demurred. Hence today the stadium and even its emblematic arch are hidden behind neighbouring tower blocks. A "proper" stadium apron would have enabled a more effective security operation for what turned out to be a shambolic Euro final in 2021.

Yet the show must go on – and it does with more magical memories. Unfashionable to say but many of those are provided by the 152-year loyalty of the FA Cup.

The post-war era was marked by a sequence of injury-jinxed showpieces including the dramatic (Stanley) Matthews final of 1953 and Manchester United's defeats in 1957 and 1958. United's upsets by Aston Villa and Bolton were separated by the Munich air crash tragedy. In 1957 they had been within 90 minutes of becoming the first double winners of the century until Peter McParland broke Ray Wood's jaw in the days before substitutes. Double delight was first tasted, instead, by Danny Blanchflower's Tottenham in 1961.

Cup magic…Wigan manager Roberto Martinez holds the 2013 FA Cup trophy with match winner Ben Watson

> To date Wembley has staged a record seven European Cup/Champions League finals (with the eighth to come in 2024) plus two in the European Championship and two in the now defunct Cup Winners' Cup

More glory for Tottenham in 1981 when Ricky Villa slalomed through the Manchester City defence for the finest individual Wembley goal in living memory. Some 19 years later Chelsea's 1-0 defeat of Aston Villa brought down the curtain on 77 years of history. Seven years later, in 2007, a new Wembley cup final era was launched with Chelsea's 1-0 defeat of Manchester United. The first of 16 so far in its new home.

For all the fuss granted the Premier League, the FA Cup final retains its mystique: in 2008 Portsmouth beat Cardiff City 1-0, two unlikely finalists and Pompey's first win since 1939; in 2013 Wigan Athletic sprang one of the great upsets with a 1-0 defeat of newly-enriched Manchester City; and in 2020 the COVID final, played behind closed doors, saw Arsenal beat Chelsea 2-1 to land a record 14th cup.

That is the Wembley tradition: history – and a guarantee of more to come.

The Final Whistle
Nationwide
Nationwide
Nationwide
Nationwide
Nationwide
Nationwide

Twin towers…a view from outside the ground ahead of the last game at old Wembley, England 0-1 Germany

Glenn Moore

Infighting, striking and player power

Three of the World Cup's leading contenders have seen their preparations undermined

With barely three months to go to the World Cup, coaches should be fine-tuning tactics, administrators finessing schedules, and players focusing on form and fitness.

Instead, the teams ranked fifth, sixth and seventh in the world have been mired in internal conflict.

In France, player power led to the removal of the coach, Corinne Diacre, after five-and-a-half divisive and unsuccessful years. In Canada the federation's president, Nick Bontis, resigned following a bitter dispute over pay and conditions with the Olympic gold-medal winning squad, while Spain's coach Jorge Vilda has so far survived, despite 16 senior players refusing to play under him.

Vilda took over after Spain went out in the group stage of the 2015 World Cup. While they made the last 16 in 2019, and last eight of the Euros in 2017 and 2022, the players feel *La Roja* have not kept pace with their own progress, reportedly blaming this on training methods, inadequate preparation and coaching.

Initially a group of senior players privately expressed their dissatisfaction with Vilda to the FA head, Luis Rubiales. When this failed to induce change, 15 – including many from 2021 Champions League winners Barcelona – wrote to the Spanish federation making themselves unavailable for selection, stating that "the situation that has arisen in the Spanish national team" was having a negative impact on their "emotional state" and "health".

They did not call for Vilda's removal, but it was implicit. They were supported by the injured Alexia Putellas, the two-time winner of both the Ballon d'Or Feminin and FIFA Best awards.

> Teams ranked fifth, sixth and seventh in the world have been mired in internal conflict

Six months on, the 15 – plus former skipper Irene Paredes, who had been involved in the initial protest – remain in exile. Spain have since beaten the United States and Japan, drawn with Sweden and lost narrowly in Australia. They remain strong because most Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid players, strongly encouraged by their clubs, did not join the boycott. One veteran, Jennifer Hermoso, now based in Mexico, has returned to the fold.

They are not, however, seen as credible World Cup winners, especially as Putellas is unlikely to consent to playing once fit, even if a favourable draw means they should at least make the last eight.

It is hard to envisage a happy resolution; either Rubiales relents, Vilda quits, or the players give in – none of which seem likely at this stage. Even if the 16 players do return, the squad will be a very uneasy mix between those who joined the boycott and those who did not.

There were parallels with France as Diacre initially survived, retaining the backing of federation president Noel Le Graet despite some disappointing results and a series of disputes with players.

Sacked...former France coach Corinne Diacre

Paris FC's Gaetane Thiney's 163-cap career was ended after she criticised Diacre early in 2020, later in the year then-Lyon goalkeeper Sarah Bouhaddi (now at Paris Saint-Germain) said she would no longer play under Diacre, and that "winning a title with this coach seems impossible to me. We play in a very, very negative environment."

Subsequently captain Amandine Henry and Eugenie Le Sommer, both also members of the multiple European champions Lyon, were frozen out.

Finally, in February, current captain Wendie Renard said she "could no longer support the current system". PSG strikers Kadidiatou Diani and Marie-Antoinette Katoto, quickly followed.

Diacre came out fighting, saying she would continue. But her days were numbered when Le Graet was forced out by a sexual harassment scandal, allegations that he denies. Nine days later, Diacre was sacked.

"Enough is enough" ...Canada players protest against their federation

In Canada the team acted as a collective. Canada Soccer won the first round, forcing the players to play in the SheBelieves Cup in the United States under threat of pursuing them personally for damages if they went on strike, but it was a pyrrhic victory.

Soon after, Bontis quit and the federation was being excoriated in a parliamentary hearing. Veteran captain Christine Sinclair told MPs: "Our most painstaking battle has been with our own federation and trying to obtain fair and equitable treatment."

The players' main complaint was the lack of support they are to receive before and during the World Cup compared to that provided for the men at Qatar. The discrepancy is especially notable as they are serious

contenders for the trophy while the men (who support their fight) were outsiders who lost every match.

Pay and youth development are also at issue. The two sides have struck an interim agreement but there is much ground still to cover.

All of this would appear to narrow the field of contenders, with European champions England and co-hosts Australia emerging as the most likely candidates to take United States' crown.

English women's football has been flourishing since the Euros, with the team even forcing the UK government into a policy supporting girls' football in schools. Sarina Wiegman's side went into the Finalissima against Brazil still unbeaten since she took over with 25 wins and four draws in her 29 games, having never conceded more than one goal in a game.

South Korea, Belgium and Italy were the latest to be put to the sword in a home-hosted tournament. The loss of Beth Mead through injury was to an extent compensated for by the emergence of Lauren James, sister of Chelsea club-mate Reece.

Australia made it seven wins in succession with a Cup of Nations success against Spain, Czech Republic and Jamaica, their confidence flying since a 3-1 win in Denmark in October transformed the mood.

But co-hosts New Zealand are just hoping a kind draw enables them to avoid humiliation. They have lost five on the trot at home without scoring a goal, including two defeats to Argentina and a 5-0 thrashing by Portugal. Elsewhere a somewhat inconsistent Germany have lost Dzsenifer Marozsan, who has retired from international football citing the need to protect her recovery from an ACL injury. Sweden's results have also been mixed but, after much experimentation, Vlatko Andonovski's United States appear to be finding form at the right time. With their own dispute between players and US Soccer now settled they remain the ones to beat.

Clinging on...Spain boss Jorge Vilda

Round-up

Winners...Leah Williamson and Kim Little lift the League Cup for Arsenal

▸ GUNNERS BACK AMONG HONOURS

Arsenal won their first trophy since 2019 when they came from behind to beat London rivals Chelsea 3-1 in the English League Cup final in front of a competition record crowd of 19,010 at Crystal Palace's Selhurst Park.

FIFA president... Gianni Infantino

▸ SAUDI SPONSORSHIP DROPPED

Protests bore fruit when FIFA dropped plans for Visit Saudi to be World Cup sponsors. Co-hosts Australia and New Zealand, fans, and prominent players such as Alex Morgan and Vivianne Miedema argued Saudi restrictions on women and the LGBTQ+ community made the deal inappropriate.

However, Infantino pointed out "double standards" noting, "there is $1.5 billion worth of trade between Australia and Saudi Arabia every year. This doesn't seem to be a problem."

▸ MORE WORLD CUP ACL BLOWS

The curse of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries continues to hit the World Cup with Janine Beckie (Canada, Portland Thorns) and Elise Kellond-Knight (Australia, Melbourne Victory) both ruled out along with Sam Mewis (United States, Kansas City) who needed further surgery on a knee first injured in August 2021.

Ruled out...Janine Beckie (L)

▸ MORE CASH, BUT NOT EQUAL

FIFA agreed to increase the prize money for this year's World Cup to $110m, plus $31m in preparation funding and $11m in compensation to clubs, tripling the commitment for the 2019 finals. However, it is less than a fifth of the $820m invested in the 2022 men's finals, which included $440m prize money.

President Gianni Infantino said FIFA's "ambition" and "objective" was for the women's 2027 prize money to equal the men's 2026 competition.

▸ UTAH BACK IN NWSL

Utah Royals will return to NWSL in 2024, four years after exiting due to an ownership scandal. The new team, which is again linked to MLS club Real Salt Lake and shares some ownership with Utah Jazz basketball and Crystal Palace FC, bought back in for a bargain $2m as part of a deal struck when it's predecessor was terminated.

▸ WSL DEPARTURES

Former Bayern Munich coach Jens Scheuer left Brighton after just six matches while fellow WSL club Tottenham sacked Rehanne Skinner after nine successive defeats.

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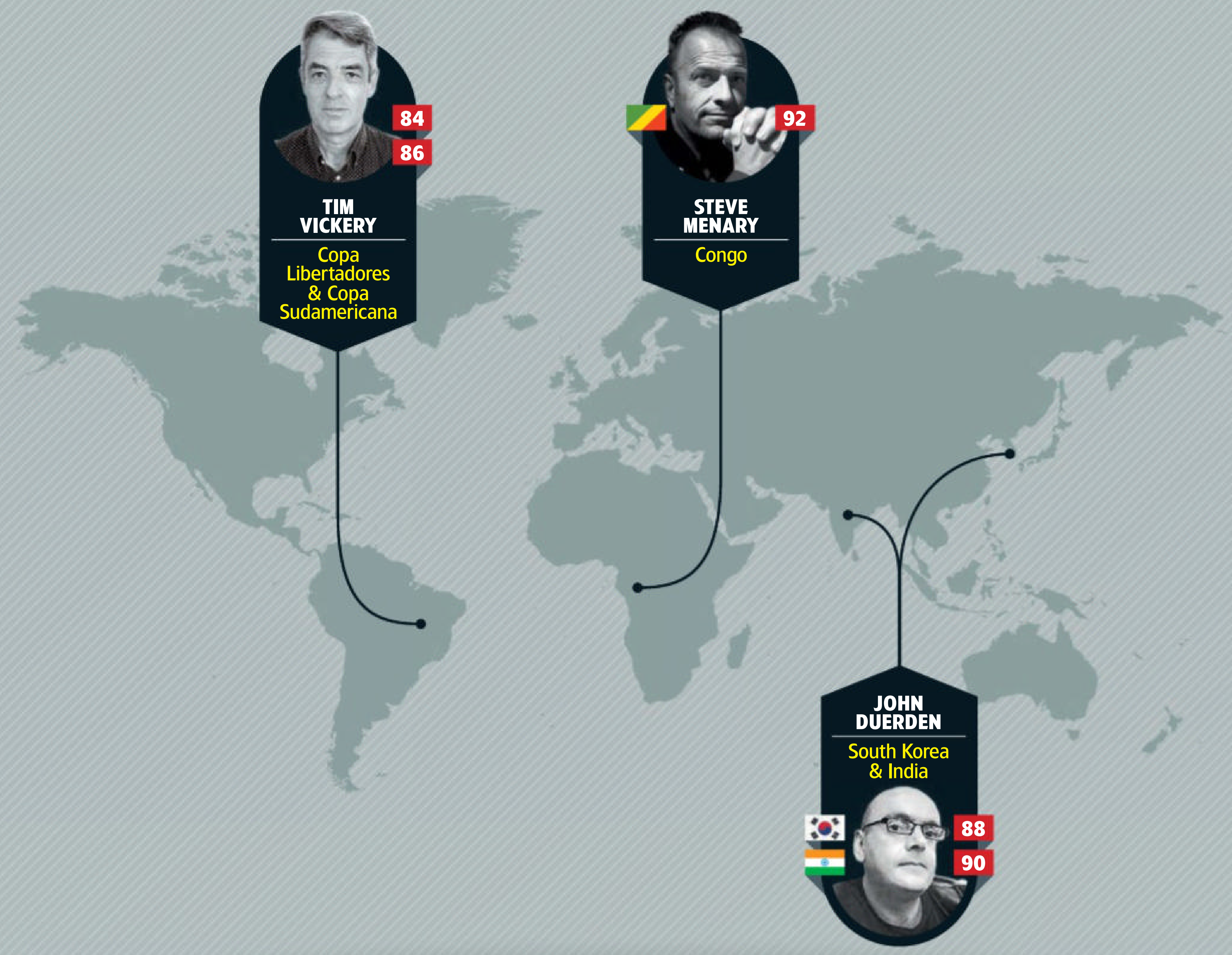
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TIM VICKERY

Samba sides set to dominate

Can anyone compete with the Brazilian clubs in the 2023 Copa Libertadores?

For a five-year period only one Brazilian club made it to the final of the Copa Libertadores. That was as recent as 2014 to 2018, but it now seems like ancient history. The competition has entered into an era of almost complete Brazilian domination. An immense financial gulf has opened up between Brazil's big clubs and the rest of the continent, and the consequences on the pitch are obvious.

The Brazilian giants can bring back two types of players from Europe – veterans looking for some late career glory and those in their mid 20s who, for whatever reason, have not lived up to expectations. And with increasingly precise scouting, they are also cherry picking from neighbouring countries. The last three finals have been all-Brazilian affairs, and so there is a question hanging over the 2023 competition: can anyone bring this domination to an end?

There is an obvious place to look. Last year's final eight were carved up between Brazil and Argentina. Indeed, the last final without Brazilian involvement was 2018's controversial clash between River Plate and Boca Juniors, and the Buenos Aires giants remain the most likely challengers. River have come up with a

Ecuadorian underdogs... Independiente del Valle were surprise winners of the CONMEBOL Recopa in March

Copa contenders?... River Plate may offer Argentina's best hope

Samba dominance... last year's final was an all-Brazilian affair

strategy: they have expanded their ground, which now has the highest capacity of any South American stadium. With the unenviable task of succeeding Marcelo Gallardo, new coach Martin Demichelis has made an interesting start. The loss of Julian Alvarez and Enzo Fernandez torpedoed the end of Gallardo's reign. Demichelis is building a side capable of weaving pleasing midfield patterns of passing. But the vital question – for them and for everyone else – is whether they can defend against the array of attacking talent that the Brazilians can unleash against them. The early evidence of the qualifying rounds (and Independiente del Valle's shock win over Flamengo in the Recopa) is that a cautious approach is called for, either using possession to run down the clock or withdrawing to blanket defence – and this is hardly River's style.

> **The last three finals have been all-Brazilian affairs, and so there is a question hanging over the 2023 competition: can anyone bring this domination to an end?**

But might it be Boca's? Hugo Ibarra's side won the domestic title late last year by grinding out some tough results. This season, with all his strikers available, a 4-3-3 system has left them dangerously open, and a strategy rethink is called for.

Fernando Gago's Racing enjoyed a fine 2022, but the loss of the goals from midfield of Carlos Alcaraz cuts deep, and Gabriel Milito's Argentinos Juniors can be pleasing on the eye but surely lack the firepower for a serious challenge.

Nobody will be underestimating the representatives from Ecuador. Independiente del Valle saw off Brazilian opponents in Sao Paulo to win last year's Sudamericana and then followed it up with a penalties victory over Libertadores champions Flamengo in the Recopa. While the next crop of youngsters is being prepared, the current side is much older, more experienced and streetwise. It would be a surprise if they were to go all the way, and much the same applies to Barcelona who, without the advantage of altitude, are the only side from outside Brazil and Argentina to reach the semi-finals twice since the 2017 format change.

The other country that consistently punches above its weight is Paraguay, who this year are represented by the big three. Cerro Porteno have already taken a Brazilian scalp, knocking out Fortaleza in qualification, and Libertad and Olimpia will also be extremely competitive. But do they have the talent to have justifiable hopes of the title?

The big disappointment of recent times has been Colombia. Atletico Nacional won the competition in 2016, the last time the Libertadores was squeezed into the first half of the year. But since then only two Colombian sides have made it out of the group phase. Nacional are back this time, and are the big hope.

Elsewhere, Nacional of Uruguay have suffered from the loss of Luis Suarez and others to Brazil and have already been forced into a coaching change this year. Chile's poor recent run is unlikely to improve, although Colo-Colo might have their moments. Bolivia's big two, The Strongest and Bolivar, at least have the advantage of the extreme altitude of La Paz, making them contenders to get out of the group. No Peruvian side has got that far in ten years, but there is optimism that one of Alianza Lima, Melgar or Sporting Cristal might do it this time. And only one Venezuelan team has made the cut in 11 years, and there is little hope that this will change in 2023.

Which leaves the Brazilians. With two wins each, Flamengo and Palmeiras have carved up the last four years. So they are the teams to beat, though there are challenges for their Portuguese coaches. Can Abel Ferreira nurse a thin-looking Palmeiras squad through the campaign, and will Vitor Perreira be able to get the balance right at Flamengo? Or, ten years on from their 2013 triumph, can Atletico Mineiro inaugurate a new stadium with a second continental title?

These are the big three. Just behind them come the fascinatingly anarchic Fluminense of Fernando Diniz; a Corinthians team with the experience for a cup run; Internacional, who are still smarting from last year's Sudamericana elimination by Melgar of Peru; and the 2022 beaten finalists Athletico Paranaense, an ambitious outfit who will dream of going one better this time. The Brazilian contingent looks awesomely strong – and it will be no surprise if two of them are fighting it out in the final in Rio's Maracana stadium on November 11.

THE TEAMS

The draw for the Copa Libertadores group stage took place on March 27

POT 1

- Flamengo
- River Plate
- Palmeiras
- Boca Juniors
- Nacional
- Athletico Paranaense
- Independiente del Valle
- Olimpia

POT 2

- Libertad
- Atletico Nacional
- Internacional
- Barcelona
- Racing
- Corinthians
- Colo-Colo
- Fluminense

POT 3

- Bolivar
- The Strongest
- Melgar
- Alianza Lima
- Argentinos Juniors
- Metropolitanos
- Aucas
- Monagas

POT 4

- Liverpool
- Deportivo Pereira
- Nublense
- Patronato
- Atletico Mineiro
- Sporting Cristal
- Cerro Porteno
- Independiente Medellin

TIM VICKERY

The road to Montevideo

The 2023 edition of South America's second-tier club competition is wide open

South America's second-string competition is not easy to predict at this stage. Eight potential heavyweights are not even in the field yet – as in the UEFA Champions and Europa Leagues, the teams who finish third in their Copa Libertadores group will join the Copa Sudamericana in the knockout rounds, and in two of the last three seasons teams entering the Sudamericana through this route have ended up winning the competition.

This time, though, there has been an important and surely beneficial change. Previously, the last 16 were made up of the group winners and those teams coming from the Libertadores, meaning that plenty of the group games were meaningless. Now, the teams that finish second will go into a play-off against the sides from the Libertadores.

But the shadow of South America's leading cup competition still falls heavy. One of the great incentives to win the Sudamericana is that this ensures participation in the following year's Libertadores – which is why Sao Paulo's defeat in last year's final to Ecuador's Independiente del Valle still cuts so deep.

Sao Paulo have a special relationship with the Libertadores, and set out last year with the objective of getting back into the competition. They failed. Another failure will be unacceptable, so winning the Sudamericana is a priority for them, as it probably is for Fortaleza, disappointed at crashing out of the qualifying rounds of the Libertadores but happy to be in a competition where victory is a possibility. The other Brazilian

Hat-trick hero...Penarol forward Matias Arezo scored a treble against old club River Plate Montevideo

Road to Montevideo... Bryan Angulo celebrates after scoring for Emelec in qualifying

teams – Botafogo, Red Bull Bragantino, America Mineiro, Santos and Goias – will probably seek to balance priorities in an over-cluttered calendar. A shot at some silverware is always welcome, but will have to be measured against potential threats and opportunities in domestic football.

Brazil has produced three of the last four Sudamericana finalists, but the deck does not look quite as stacked as in the Libertadores – not least because seven of the country's biggest teams are in that competition.

The 2020 final, for example, was an all-Argentine affair, and a repeat of that scenario in 2023 is not out of the question. The winners that time, Defensa y Justicia, have produced another attractive, attacking side well worth watching, while San Lorenzo, inaugural winners of the competition 21 years ago, have made a solid start to the domestic season. Estudiantes are still smarting from their controversial quarter-final elimination in last year's Libertadores but, like La Plata rivals Gimnasia y Esgrima, they have not begun the league campaign well. Also in the mix are Newell's Old Boys, Huracan and Tigre – all functional units who will not be a pushover.

Elsewhere, Penarol of Uruguay look interesting. They are a team that tends to oscillate: eye-catching when they are forming a new group of players, struggling when that crop have been sold. The current side are in the former category, boosted by the January arrival of 20-year-old striker Matias Arezo. On loan from Spanish second-tier side Granada, he struck a hat-trick against former club River Plate Montevideo in qualifying.

> The 2020 final was an all-Argentine affair, and a repeat of that scenario in 2023 is not out of the question

Ecuador are well represented with Emelec, who enjoyed a creditable Libertadores campaign last year, and LDU, who won this title in 2009 and with the altitude of Quito behind them should never be discounted.

Colombian outfit Santa Fe were champions in 2015, and form a strong trio together with a talented Millonarios team and Tolima, the country's most consistent side in recent times.

Peru sprung a major surprise last year with Melgar going all the way to the semi-finals. This time hopes are pinned on traditional Lima giants Universitario and Universidad Cesar Vallejo from the northern city of Trujillo, who will hope to carry their excellent domestic form into the continental competition.

Guarani are Paraguay's best chance, Chile's trio will enter the competition more in hope than expectation, and Bolivia's duo may even be short of hope. There will be interest, though, in Academia Puerto Cabello of Venezuela, a new club whose magnificent start to the season included an away win over local giants Caracas to book their spot in the group phase.

Interesting new club...Academia Puerto Cabello of Venezuela

THE TEAMS

The draw for the Copa Sudamericana group stage took place on March 27

POT 1

Penarol
Sao Paulo
Santos
LDU Quito
Estudiantes
Emelec
San Lorenzo
Santa Fe

POT 2

Defensa y Justicia
Guarani
Red Bull Bragantino
Universitario
Tolima
Botafogo
Newell's Old Boys
Palestino

POT 3

Oriente Petrolero
Estudiantes de Merida
Danubio
Tigre
America Mineiro
Blooming
Goias
Universidad Cesar Vallejo

POT 4

Audax Italiano
Gimnasia y Esgrima
Academia Puerto Cabello
Tacuary
Millonarios
Huracan
Fortaleza
Magallanes

South Korea

JOHN DUERDEN

40 years of the K-League

The 2023 campaign marks a significant anniversary in the history of South Korea's top flight

On February 25, the 2023 K-League season kicked-off with defending South Korean champions Ulsan Hyundai defeating runners-up Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 2-1.

"We want to tackle a fresh set of challenges and chart a new path," Ulsan coach Hong Myung-bo said. "We will do the best we can in every match, just as we've done all along. We want to have the same approach this season as last."

That opening game marked the 40th anniversary of Asia's oldest professional league. Back in 1983, five teams fought it out with the winners of the inaugural competition, the church-backed club Hallelujah, finishing above Daewoo Royals, Yukong Elephants, POSCO Dolphins and Kookmin Bank.

Much has changed since then, with plenty of ups and downs along the way. There was a massive boost to attendances in the league for a while after the 2002 World Cup, when South Korea reached the semi-finals on home soil, but that excitement was not built upon. By 2011 there were 16 teams but a massive match-fixing scandal in that season brought in a reorganisation that saw the top tier reduced to 12 by 2014 and relegation and promotion introduced.

Attendance boost...the 2002 World Cup gave football a big boost in South Korea

Record champions ...Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors have lifted the title nine times

Four of the original five teams were corporate-backed and there have been efforts to move away from the reliance on that model. Such attempts have obviously been mixed: Ulsan and Jeonbuk – the top two from the last four years – are owned respectively by Hyundai Heavy Industries, the world's largest shipbuilder, which is based in Ulsan, and Hyundai Motors. Their owners have provided the best squads.

POSCO's Pohang Steelers, Samsung's Suwon Bluewings and FC Seoul, owned by LG and then GS, have all won league titles. The one outlier in terms of success were Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma, owned and funded until 2013 by the Unification Church, popularly known as the Moonies. All those teams, including Ulsan and Jeonbuk, have been champions of Asia at least twice, except Seoul who reached the Champions League final in 2013.

> **There was a massive boost to attendances in the league for a while after the 2002 World Cup, when South Korea reached the semi-finals on home soil, but that excitement was not built upon**

Such corporate backing can be a strength and a weakness. It means that the lack of money in the league itself can be overcome. Broadcast revenue does not amount to much and there is not enough income from ticket sales either. Attendances have declined, although the figure rose from 5,000 to 8,000 in 2019, the last pre-pandemic season. The 2002 World Cup stadiums, most of which were too big and out of town, haven't helped, while local coaches tend to be counter-attacking and pragmatic which doesn't always lead to the most exciting spectacles.

While corporate ownership can make for stable conditions (and it was notable that star striker Hwang Ui-jo returned from Europe to join Seoul, not one of the smaller teams), in the long-term most believe that it has removed the incentive for clubs to really connect with their communities – something that Japanese clubs have excelled at – and develop creative marketing and commercial campaigns.

Some of the lows in the league's history have come when the owners have moved their teams. In 2004, LG moved the Cheetahs from Anyang to Seoul and, two years later, SK took Bucheon from the outskirts of the capital to the southern island of Jeju overnight, renaming itself Jeju United.

That has partly inspired the growth of city-owned clubs. These so-called "citizen" teams are often financed by the local or regional governments which means they can't splash the cash to the same extent but tend to have a closer relationship to local communities. The likes of Incheon United and Daegu FC (interestingly both these citizen teams have moved out of their cavernous World Cup Stadiums with respective capacities of 50,000 and 60,000 into much smaller and suitable arenas) have made the top four of late and Gangwon FC finished in the top six last season.

"I think it's crystal clear that we don't have quite the depth that other top-tier teams do," Gangwon coach Choi Yong-soo said. "But we want to prove that football isn't just about having big-name players."

That is the next step for all the smaller sides; turning decent seasons into genuine challenges for the title. That would give the K-League a boost as it celebrates its 40th birthday.

There are reasons to be cheerful. The K-League may now be middle-aged but is still one of Asia's strongest. Despite the problems, the quality is decent, facilities are usually good, fans are friendly and players are approachable. If it is true that life begins at 40 then there is still a bright future for the K-League.

"Citizen" team... Daegu FC

India

JOHN DUERDEN

ATK Mohun Bagan take title

Kolkata-based side are crowned Indian Super League champions for the first time as post-COVID normality returns to the Indian game

In the 2022-23 Indian Super League (ISL) season, football on the subcontinent returned to normal after two years of lockdowns and bio-secure bubbles. Goa hosted the final in March as ATK Mohun Bagan defeated Bengaluru 4-3 in a penalty shootout to become champions after two hours of football ended 2-2. The celebrations went on long into the night for those fans who had made the trip to the west coast and for those watching back in Kolkata on the opposite side of the subcontinent.

The final of the championship play-off series – the latter stages of which were dominated by penalties – was a meeting between the two teams that finished third and fourth in the regular league season. Of the 11 that started out and played each other twice, the top two went straight into the semi-finals where they waited to see which of the teams that finished from third to sixth would emerge from their knockout games.

After finishing third, ATK Mohun Bagan's play-off route was solid rather than spectacular. First came a 2-0 win over sixth-placed Odisha, followed by a semi-final against Hyderabad, the team that finished second. There were no goals in either leg, which meant penalties; a shootout that the Kolkata club won 4-3. It was good practice.

Their Spanish coach Juan Ferrando, just 42, would have expected to face

Champions... ATK Mohun Bagan players celebrate during the play-offs
Credit: Alamy

Indian legend... Bengaluru striker Sunil Chhetri
Credit: Instagram @bengalurufc

Mumbai City in the final. Mumbai, part of the City Football Group stable, were defending champions and dominant in the regular league season. After a relatively quiet start with nine points from their first five games, they moved into top gear, winning the next 11. After such dominance under 38-year-old English coach Des Buckingham, and 54 goals scored in 20 games, it didn't look as if any team could stop City from going all the way.

The final of the championship play-off series – the latter stages of which were dominated by penalties – was a meeting between the two teams that finished third and fourth in the regular league season

First, however, they would have to win their semi-final against Bengaluru, who had finished fourth. It was a meeting between two English coaches as Simon Grayson led the underdogs. For the former Leeds United boss, just getting into the play-offs in his first season was an achievement. Initial results were mediocre, with just ten points from their first 12 games, but then Bengaluru went and won the final eight matches of the season and headed into the final stages as the league's form team.

Momentum can be a powerful thing and the drama was just starting. Bengaluru's first play-off was against fifth-placed Kerala Blasters and it made headlines all over the country and the region. After seven minutes of extra-time Bengaluru's Sunil Chhetri, the great legend of Indian football and still scoring at 38, finally broke the deadlock. His cheeky chip from a free-kick was nestling in the back of the net as the Blasters were still getting ready to defend the set-piece. Once they realised that they were behind and that no end of protesting was going to change the referee's mind, the Kerala players walked off the pitch and didn't come back.

Runaway leaders... Mumbai City topped the league table but were dumped out in the play-off semis
Credit: Instagram @mumbaicityfc

"I've never seen this in my 22-year career. I always ask the referee. It was a bitter sweet moment but I'm happy that we are through to the semi-finals," Chhetri said as the game was awarded to Bengaluru.

Then it was time for Mumbai in the last four. Chhetri struck in the first leg in the port city to give his team a 1-0 advantage to take back to Bengaluru. At home however, they then lost 2-1, meaning another penalty shootout.

It was epic. With the score at 8-8, Gurpreet Singh saved Mehtab Singh's penalty. City, the champions, were out and Bengaluru were heading to the final.

They could then sit back and see who they would face. After the 0-0 draw with Hyderabad in the first leg away from home, over 50,000 fans in Kolkata watched ATK Mohun Bagan squeeze through in the second leg after another goalless stalemate and a penalty shootout.

So heading into the championship showdown, both ATK Mohun Bagan and Bengaluru had shown their composure and ability from the spot. Penalties were to play an even bigger part in the final with three of the four goals scored during the 120 minutes of football coming from 12 yards out.

Two of them, the first and the last, were scored for ATK Mohun Bagan by Australian forward Dimitrios Petratos. In between, Chhetri also got one for Bengaluru and Fiji forward Roy Krishna scored the only non-penalty goal. It ended all square and ATK Mohun Bagan shaded the shootout to win the ISL title for the first time.

Congo

STEVE MENARY

Paying their way

AS Otoho dominate the Congo Premier League with a simple approach

Paying their way ...Otoho players and their coach

AS Otoho d’Oyo’s unprecedented run of five titles in a row in Congo comes not from paying more than their rivals but paying regularly. “Otoho give good salaries and pay on time, so if Otoho come for players here they will go because some clubs do not pay,” says the club’s French coach, Julien Mette. “Maybe they will get a signing-on fee but they are not always paid on time.”

Unlike many countries, top-tier players are generally paid the same salary of around €800 a month. That is not a legal requirement, but a cultural one. Mette adds: “I try to explain to our owner that if you want a good striker or goalkeeper you need to pay more. If I ask him to give me a big amount of money for more players, then he can afford this but it’s just not their culture.”

Simply paying players on time has helped owner Raoul Ominga, head of local oil company SNPC, bring an unprecedented success to Otoho from the small town of Oyo in the Cuvette Region more than 400km from the capital Brazzaville.

Ominga bought the club in 2016, when Otoho were in the second tier. In their first season after promotion in 2017, Otoho were runners-up to AC Leopards de Dolisie and have won the league every season since.

Originally from southwest France, Mette first came to Congo in 2016 in unusual circumstances. “There was a junior in France who I had coached since he was 14,” explains Mette. “It turns out his father was a deputy minister in Congo and owned a club. He asked his son if he knew a coach and the boy recommended me.”

Otoho coach ...Julien Mette speaking to his players

Mette helped Tongo avoid relegation from the top flight and in 2018 joined Otoho as general manager before leaving in 2019 for a four-year spell in charge of the Djibouti national team. Despite a massive improvement in results, Mette fell victim to local politics and returned to take charge of Otoho last August.

The core of Mette’s Otoho side is national team defender Beranger Itoua and midfielder Tresor Toropite from the Central African Republic. Otoho failed to win any of Mette’s first four games in charge – including two CAF Champions League qualifiers – but recovered to finish top at the halfway stage of their domestic league campaign.

“It’s not an historic team. We are like PSG in France,” says Mette. “In Oyo, the people do not have much to do, there is no cinema or theatre, so we are better supported. There is maybe 800 or 1,000 people in the stands but all the good facilities are in Brazzaville.”

> Simply paying players on time has helped owner Raoul Ominga, head of local oil company SNPC, bring an unprecedented success to Otoho

The drive to Brazzaville takes ten hours and crowds are below 500 there, but Mette believes that if Otoho can have consistent success in the second-tier CAF Confederation Cup then more people will come.

In 2021-22, the club qualified for the group stage and games with TP Mazembe from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, Al Masry from Egypt and Cameroon’s Coton Sport.

Clubs need to get through the first round of Champions League qualifiers for a place in the Confederation Cup play-offs and Otoho fell short this season, losing 2-0 on aggregate to Cape Town City. “If the club want to grow, then we need to qualify every year,” sighs Mette, who knows that to do that would involve changing Congo’s football payment culture.

APRIL 14-MAY 14

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Champions of Asia

The long-awaited AFC Champions League final is approaching at last. When the first leg takes place on April 29, Urawa Red Diamonds of Japan will have waited over eight months since defeating South Korea's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors on penalties in the eastern zone semi-final. Their western zone opponents, Saudi Arabian champions Al Hilal, will go into the clash as favourites having won two of the last three editions, but the Reds may feel they have the advantage by playing the second leg, on May 6, at home. Elsewhere, the African Champions League is also approaching crunch time in the coming weeks, with the quarter-finals taking place in April and the semi-finals in May. The draw for both takes place at the start of April.

Holders...Al Hilal lift last year's AFC Champions League trophy

Champions League, Europa League & Conference League

The roads to Istanbul (CL), Budapest (EL) and Prague (ECL) have been mapped out following the draws for the quarter-finals onwards. Manchester City and Chelsea will meet in the CL semis if they can beat Bayern Munich and Real Madrid respectively, while a standout tie in the EL sees a repeat of last season's ECL final between Roma and Feyenoord. For the draws in full, turn to page 95.

Repeat...Feyenoord v Roma

Domestic cup finals

The finals of the Spanish, French and Dutch Cups will all take place over the coming weeks, with the finalists undecided at the time of writing. In Spain, either Barcelona or Real Madrid will face Osasuna or Athletic Bilbao in the final, while in France, Ligue 2 Annecy were hoping to cause an upset against Toulouse in the semi-final. The winners of that tie will face either Nantes or five-time winners Lyon. The story of the KNVB Cup is amateur side Spakenburg, who were hoping to continue their giant-killing feats against PSV, with the winners facing either Feyenoord or Ajax.

UEFA Youth League

Scouts with an eye on the next generation of European talent will be paying close attention to the UEFA Youth League, which draws to a close in April. The semi-finals and final all take place on the same weekend in Nyon, Switzerland, with Sporting taking on AZ and Hajduk Split facing Milan on Friday, April 21, and the final taking place three days later.

5 unmissable matches

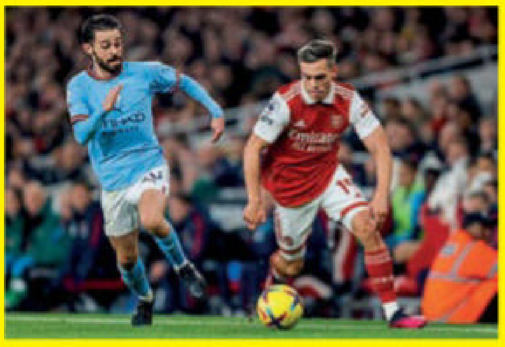
- **Athletic Bilbao v Real Sociedad, April 15**
The Basque derby rarely disappoints, especially in recent years, with the last four meetings packed with goals and late drama and a win apiece for both sides. Athletic would love to derail their neighbours' hopes of a top-four finish.

- **LA Galaxy v LAFC, April 16**
In arguably MLS's biggest derby, "*El Trafico*" will see five-time champions Galaxy host last season's MLS Cup and Supporters' Shield winners LAFC. In their three meetings in 2022, 13 goals were scored, including three in the last ten minutes in October's showdown.

Los Angeles derby...LA Galaxy versus LAFC

- **Juventus v Napoli, April 23**
Currently enjoying their best season in more than 30 years, a victory at the home of one of their biggest rivals would be the icing on the cake for runaway Serie A leaders Napoli.

- **Manchester City v Arsenal, April 26**
Premier League titles are rarely decided in one-off games, but this one could be more decisive than most. Arsenal have been top of the table for most of the season, but City will take confidence from February's 3-1 win at the Emirates.



Head-to-head...Manchester City and Arsenal

- **Arsenal v Chelsea, April 29**
What a week for the Gunners. Just days after their crucial clash with Manchester City, they face London rivals Chelsea, who would like nothing better than to end Arsenal's title hopes.

Internationals

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Group A

Mar 25 – Glasgow
Scotland 3 (McGinn 21, McTominay 87, 90+3)
Cyprus 0
Scotland: Gunn – Porteous, Hanley, Tierney; Hickey (Patterson 80), Jack (Christie 67), McGregor, Robertson; McGinn, Armstrong (McTominay 67); Adams (Dykes 58).
Cyprus: Demetriou – Kousoulos (Spoljaric 45), Gogic (Loizou 79), Roberge; Antoniou, Kyriakou (Charalampous 68), Artymatas, Laifis, Ioannou; Kastanos (Tzionis 79); Pittas (Kakoullis 68).
Sent off: Ioannou 90+5.

Mar 25 – Malaga
Spain 3 (Olmo 13, Joselu 83, 85)
Norway 0
Spain: Kepa – Carvajal, Nacho, Laporte, Balde; Aspas (Ceballos 58), Rodri, Merino (Fabian 81); Olmo (Yeremy 67), Morata (Joselu 81), Gavi (Oyarazabal 58).
Norway: Nyland – Pedersen (Ryerson 74), Strandberg, Ostigard, Meling (Bjorkan 74); Berg; Berge (Solbakken 74), Odegaard, Aursnes, Elyounoussi (Strand Larsen 74); Sorloth (Brynhildsen 86).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Scotland	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Georgia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Norway	1	0	0	1	0	3	0
Cyprus	1	0	0	1	0	3	0

Group B

Mar 24 – Saint-Denis
France 4 (Griezmann 2, Upamecano 8, Mbappe 21, 88)
Netherlands 0
France: Maignan – Kounde, Konate, Upamecano, T. Hernandez; Tchouameni (Camavinga 76), Rabiot (Thuram 89); Coman (Diaby 67), Griezmann (Fofana 77), Mbappe; Kolo Muani (Giroud 77).
Netherlands: Cillessen – Timber, Geertuida (Malacia 87), Van Dijk, Ake; Wijnaldum, De Roon (Blind 67), Taylor (Weghorst 33); Berghuis (Malen 68), Depay, Simons (Klaassen 68).

Mar 24 – Algarve
Gibraltar 0
Greece 3 (Masouras 11, Siopis 45, Bakasetas 58)
Gibraltar: Coleing – Sergeant, R. Chipolina, Lopes, Olivero; Valarino (Coombes 62), Torrilla (Mouelhi 62), Ronan (J. Chipolina 85), Britto (Jolley 85); Walker, Casciaro (Styche 85).
Greece: Vlachodimos – Baldock, Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos, Tsimikas (Giannoulis 86); Siopsis, Mantalos; Masouras (Chatzigiovanis 85), Bakasetas (Fourtounis 71), Pelkas (Konstantelias 63); Giakoumakis (Pavlidis 62).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France	1	1	0	0	4	0	3
Greece	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Rep. of Ireland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gibraltar	1	0	0	1	0	3	0
Netherlands	1	0	0	1	0	4	0

Group C

Mar 23 – Naples
Italy 1 (Retegui 56)
England 2 (Rice 13, Kane 44 pen)
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Toloi, Acerbi, Spinazzola; Barella (Cristante 62), Jorginho (Tonali 69), Verratti (Scamacca 88); Berardi (Politano 62), Retegui, Pellegrini (Gnonto 69).
England: Pickford – Walker, Maguire, Stones, Shaw; Phillips, Rice, Bellingham (Gallagher 85); Saka (James 85), Kane, Grealish (Foden 69, Trippier 81).
Sent off: Shaw 80.

Mar 23 – Skopje
North Macedonia 2 (Elmas 66, Churlinov 72)
Malta 1 (Yankam 85)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Zajkov (Ristevski 90+2), Velkovski (Churlinov 58), Musliu; S. Ristovski, Atanasov, Bardhi, Alioski (Ashkovski 78); Elmas; Miovski (M. Ristovski 78), Trajkovski (Nestorovski 58).
Malta: Bonello – J. Mbong, Apap, Borg, Attard, Camenzuli (Corbalan 77); Guillaumier, Kristensen (Yankam 77), Teuma (Paiber 84); P. Mbong (Dimech 67), Satariano (Jones 84).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
N. Macedonia	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Ukraine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Malta	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Italy	1	0	0	1	1	2	0

Group D

Mar 25 – Yerevan
Armenia 1 (Kabak 10 og)
Turkey 2 (Kokcu 34, Akturkoglu 64)
Armenia: Beglaryan – Hovhannisyan, Harutyunyan, Haroyan, Voskanyan (Mkrtchyan 28, Bayramyan 54), Tiknizyan; Barseghyan, Iwu, Spertsyan, Zelarayan (Adamyan 74); Briasco (Bichakhchyan 76).
Turkey: Gunok – Kabak, Demiral (Ozcan 46), Soyuncu; Bulut, Calhanoglu, Kokcu (Tuksek 74), Kadioglu (Elmali 74); Under, Unal (Nayir 85), Tosun (Akturkoglu 46).

Mar 25 – Split
Croatia 1 (Kramaric 28)
Wales 1 (Broadhead 90+3)
Croatia: Livakovic – Juranovic, Sutalo, Gvardiol, Sosa; Modric (Majer 90+2), Brozovic, Kovacic (Pasalic 76); Kramaric (Vlasic 76), Livaja (Musa 53), Perisic.
Wales: Ward – C. Roberts, Mepham, Rodon, Williams; Wilson (Thomas 64), Morrell (J. James 90+2), Ampadu, D. James (Broadhead 64); Ramsey (Burns 64); Moore (Bradshaw 70).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkey	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Wales	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Croatia	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Latvia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Armenia	1	0	0	1	1	2	0

Group E

Mar 24 – Prague
Czech Republic 3 (Krejci 1, Cvancara 3, Kuchta 64)
Poland 1 (D. Szymanski 87)
Czech Republic: Pavlenka – Holes, Brabec, Krejci; Coufal (Doudera 71), Kral, Soucek, D. Jurasek (Zeleny 89); Cvancara (Chytil 65), Hlozek (Cerny 89), Kuchta (Barak 71).
Poland: Szczesny – Cash (Gumny 9), Bednarek, Kiwior, Karbownik (Skoras 46); Linetty (D. Szymanski 76), Bielik (Swiderski 46); S. Szymanski (Zalewski 64), Zielinski, Frankowski; Lewandowski.

Mar 24 – Chisinau
Moldova 1 (Nicolaescu 87 pen)
Faroe Islands 1 (Mikkelsen 27)
Moldova: Railean – Craciun, Mudrac (S. Cojocari 73), Posmac; Revenco, Rata, Caimacov, Platica (Stina 72); Postolachi (Motpan 46), Nicolaescu, Damascan.
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Joensen, Faro (Vatnsdal 79), G. Vatnhamar, Davidsen; Mikkelsen (Rolantsson 71), S. Vatnhamar, Andreasen, M. Olsen (Jonsson 79); Johannesen (Mneney 63), K. Olsen (Klettskard 79).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Czech Rep.	1	1	0	0	3	1	3
Faroe Islands	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Moldova	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Albania	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Poland	1	0	0	1	1	3	0

Group F

Mar 24 – Linz
Austria 4 (Sabitzer 27, 50, Gregoritsch 29, Baumgartner 69)
Azerbaijan 1 (Mahmudov 64)
Austria: Lindner – Mwene, Trauner (Ulmer 74), Danso, Wober (Posch 34); Laimer, Seiwald, Sabitzer (Ljubicic 74), Wimmer (Kainz 68); Baumgartner (Adamu 68), Gregoritsch.
Azerbaijan: Imanov – Haghverdi, Mustafazade, Hasanalizade (Krivotsyuk 46), Cafarguliyev (Aliyev 46); Israfilov (Camalov 59), Almeida (Isayev 77); Kokcu (Alaskarov 46), Mahmudov, Sheydayev; Dadashov.

Mar 24 – Solna
Sweden 0
Belgium 3 (Lukaku 35, 49, 82)
Sweden: Olsen – Wahlqvist, Lindelof, Ekdal, Augustinsson (Gudmundsson 85); Svanberg, Olsson (Gyokeres 64), Gustafson, Forsberg (Claesson 73); Kulusevski, Isak (Ibrahimovic 73).
Belgium: Courtois – Castagne, Faes, Vertonghen, Theate (Saelemaekers 86); De Bruyne, Onana, Carrasco (Openda 90); Lukebakio (Bakayoko 61), Lukaku (Bornauw 85), Trossard (Mangala 61).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Austria	1	1	0	0	4	1	3
Belgium	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Estonia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Azerbaijan	1	0	0	1	1	4	0
Sweden	1	0	0	1	0	3	0

Group G

Mar 24 – Razgrad
Bulgaria 0
Montenegro 1 (Krstovic 70)
Bulgaria: Naumov – Hristov, Antov, Petrov (Karabelyov 60); Stoyanov, I. Iliev (N. Iliev 59), Gruev, Krastev (Kirilov 76), Yordanov (Rusev 85); Despodov, Delev (Petkov 85).
Montenegro: Mijatovic – Vesovic, Savic, Vujacic, Radunovic; Savicevic, Skecic, Bakic (Jovetic 46); Marusic (Mugosa 83), Krstovic (Osmajic 71), Haksabanovic (Jovovic 46, Loncar 79).

Mar 24 – Belgrade
Serbia 2 (Tadic 16, Vlahovic 53)
Lithuania 0
Serbia: V. Milinkovic-Savic – Erakovic, Gudelj, Pavlovic; Zivkovic (Milenkovic 81), Grujic, Lukic (Ilic 72), Kostic; Tadic (Samardzic 72), A. Mitrovic (Joveljic 81), Vlahovic (S. Milinkovic-Savic 63).
Lithuania: Bartkus – Lasickas, Kazukolovas, Girdvainis, Beneta (Baravykas 85); Simkus; Cernych, Gineitis (Romanovskij 80), Golubickas (Slivka 62), Jankauskas (Novikovas 62); Paulauskas (Laukzemis 80).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Serbia	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Montenegro	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Hungary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bulgaria	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Lithuania	1	0	0	1	0	2	0

Group H

Mar 23 – Astana
Kazakhstan 1 (Samorodov 23)
Slovenia 2 (Brekalo 47, Vipotnik 78)
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Gabyshev (Kairov 68), Maliy, Marochkin, Bystrov (Erlanov 79), Vorogovskiy; Orazov, Darabayev (Beisebekov 79), Tagybergen, Samorodov (Islamkhan 63); Aymbetov (Zaynutdinov 63).
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Blazic (Brekalo 5), Bijol, Balkovec (Zajc 46); Stojanovic, Cerin, Gorenc Stankovic, Verbic (Lovric 70); Sesko, Celar (Vipotnik 70).

Mar 23 – Copenhagen
Denmark 3 (Hojlund 21, 82, 90+3)
Finland 1 (Antman 53)
Denmark: Schmeichel – Bah, Kjaer, Christensen (Nelsson 18), Maehle (Stryger Larsen 65); Hojbjerg, Norgaard, M. Jensen (Billing 77); Damsgaard (Daramy 65); Braithwaite (Wind 77), Hojlund.
Finland: Hradecky – Alho, L. Vaisanen, Ivanov, R. Jensen (Ollila 74); Lod (Forss 73), Kairinen, Kamara, Antman (Suhonen 72); Pohjanpalo, Pukki.

Mar 23 – Seravalle
San Marino 0
Northern Ireland 2 (D. Charles 24, 55)
San Marino: E. Benedettini – Ma. Battistini, Fabbri, Di Maio, Rossi (Cevoli 46), Palazzi (Tosi 46); Golinucci, Capicchioni (Mi. Battistini 72), Lazzari; Beradi (Rinaldi 60), Nanni (Vitaioli 85).
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Ballard (McGeehan 67), Cathcart, Brown (Price 82); Bradley, McNair, S. Charles, Saville (Thompson 73), Lewis (Ferguson 74); D. Charles, Washington (Magennis 67).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Denmark	1	1	0	0	3	1	3
N. Ireland	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Slovenia	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Kazakhstan	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Finland	1	0	0	1	1	3	0
San Marino	1	0	0	1	0	2	0

Group I

Mar 25 – Novi Sad
Belarus 0
Switzerland 5 (Steffen 4, 17, 29, Xhaka 62, Amdouni 65)
Belarus: Kudravets – Yuzepchuk (Bykov 33), Selyava (Bocherov 80), Volkov, Polyakov, Malkevich; Kovalev (Bakhar 46), Ebong, Yablonskiy (Klimovich 46), Grechikho; Khvashchinskiy (Morozov 61).
Switzerland: Sommer – Widmer, Akanji (Zesiger 82), Elvedi, Rodriguez; Freuler, Zakaria, Xhaka (Rieder 66); Steffen (Amdouni 58), Vargas (Fassnacht 66); Itten (Okafor 58).

Mar 25 – Tel Aviv
Israel 1 (Dor Peretz 56)
Kosovo 1 (Dasa 36 og)
Israel: O. Glazer – Dasa, Vitor, Shlomo, Leidner (Gropper 88); Gloukh (Baribo 79), Lavi, Dor Peretz; Haziza (Kna'an 67), Weissman (Natcho 88), Solomon.
Kosovo: Muric – Vojvoda (Hadergjonaj 88), Rrahmani, Kryeziu, Paqarada; Celina, Dresevic (Bersiha 88), Muslija (Zeneli 79); Zhegrova (Fazliji 67), Muriqi, Rashica.

Mar 25 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 0
Romania 2 (Man 34, Alibec 49)
Andorra: Alvarez – Chus Rubio, Llovera, Alavedra, San Nicolas (M. Garcia 86); Martinez (E. Vales 72), M. Vales (Guillen 60), Rebes, Cervos (Pujol 86); Vieira, Berto (Cucu 72).
Sent off: Rebes 61.
Romania: Radu – Ratiu, Dragusin, Burca, Sorescu; R. Marin (Baluta 65); Morutan (Dobre 73), Stanciu (Tanase 78), Olaru (M. Marin 65), Man (Popescu 73); Alibec.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Switzerland	1	1	0	0	5	0	3
Romania	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Kosovo	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Israel	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Andorra	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Belarus	1	0	0	1	0	5	0

Group J

Mar 23 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 3 (Krunic 14, 40, Dedic 63)
Iceland 0
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Sehic – Ahmedhodzic, Milicevic, Sanicanin; Dedic (Hadzikadunic 71), Hadziahmetovic (Prcic 72), Tahirovic (Cimirot 82), Krunic, Gazibegovic; Prevljak (Kodro 67), Demirovic (Bilbija 82).
Iceland: Runarsson – Palsson, Gretarsson, H. Magnusson, Olafsson; A. Sigurdsson (Anderson 67), Gudmundsson, Traustson (Thordharsson 82), Haraldsson, Thorsteinsson (Ellertsson 66); Finnbogason (Gudjohnsen 83).

Mar 23 – Lisbon
Portugal 4 (Cancelo 8, Bernardo 47, Ronaldo 51 pen, 63)
Liechtenstein 0
Portugal: Patricio – Danilo (Neves 67), Dias, Inacio; Palhinha; Cancelo, Bernardo (Vitinha 78), Fernandes (Mario 89), Guerreiro; Ronaldo (Ramos 78), Felix (Leao 67).
Liechtenstein: Buchel – S. Wolfinger (Yildiz 80), Malin (Luchinger 38), Traber, Hofer, Meier (F. Wolfinger 60); Frommelt, Wieser, Hasler; Gassner (Lorenz 60), Sele (Beck 80).

Mar 23 – Trnava
Slovakia 0
Luxembourg 0
Slovakia: Dubravka – Pekarik (Tomic 82), Gyomber, Satka, Hancko; Kucka, Lobotka, Duda (Benes 80); Suslov (Mak 73), Polievka (Bozenik 73), Haraslin.
Luxembourg: Moris – Bohnert (Rupil 84), Chanot, Gerson, Pinto; Sinani (S. Thill 84), Barreiro, Martins, Borges Sanches (Jans 63); Olesen (V. Thill 64), Rodrigues.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	1	1	0	0	4	0	3
Bosnia-Herz	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Slovakia	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Luxembourg	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Iceland	1	0	0	1	0	3	0
Liechtenstein	1	0	0	1	0	4	0

- *All Euro 2024 qualifying group standings are correct up to the conclusion of matchday one*
- *A round-up of late March's international action, including friendlies, will be included in June's issue*

Club football

EUROPE

2022-23 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Round of 16 – 2nd Legs

Mar 7 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 2 (Sterling 43, Havertz 53 pen)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0
Chelsea win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 7 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 5 (Rafa Silva 38, Ramos 45+2, 57, Mario 71 pen, Neres 77)
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Meijer 87)
Benfica win 7-1 on aggregate

Mar 8 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 0
Milan (Ita) 0
Milan win 1-0 on aggregate

Mar 8 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Choupo-Moting 61, Gnabry 89)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0
Bayern Munich win 3-0 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Porto
Porto (Por) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 0
internazionale win 1-0 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 7 (Haaland 22 pen, 24, 45+2, 53, 57, Gundogan 49, De Bruyne 90+2)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 0
Manchester City win 8-1 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 3 (Osimhen 45+2, 53, Zielinski 64 pen)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0
Napoli win 5-0 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Benzema 78)
Liverpool (Eng) 0
Real Madrid win 6-2 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Real Madrid (Spa) v Chelsea (Eng); Benfica (Por) v Inter (Ita); Manchester City (Eng) v Bayern Munich (Ger); Milan (Ita) v Napoli (Ita)

Semi-Final Draw

Milan (Ita)/Napoli (Ita) v Benfica (Por)/Inter (Ita); Real Madrid (Spa)/Chelsea (Eng) v Manchester City (Eng)/Bayern Munich (Ger)

2022-23 EUROPA LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Legs

Mar 9 – Berlin
Union Berlin (Ger) 3 (Juranovic 42, Knoche 69, Michel 89)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 3 (Boniface 28, 72, Vertessen 58)

Mar 9 – Seville
Sevilla (Spa) 2 (Jordan 56, Lamela 85)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0

Mar 9 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Di Maria 53)
Freiburg (Ger) 0

Mar 9 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Demirbay 10, Tapsoba 86)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0

Mar 9 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 2 (Inacio 34, Paulinho 55)
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Saliba 22, Morita 62 og)

Mar 9 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 4 (Rashford 6, Antony 52, Fernandes 58, Weghorst 82)
Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Perez 32)

Mar 9 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (El Shaarawy 13, Kumbulla 87)
Real Sociedad (Spa) 0

Mar 9 – Warsaw
Shakhtar Donestk (Ukr) 1 (Rakitskyi 79)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Bullaude 88)

Last 16 – 2nd Legs

Mar 16 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 3 (Teuma 18, Lazare 63, Lapoussin 90+4)
Union Berlin (Ger) 0
Union Saint-Gilloise win 6-3 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Valencia 41 pen)
Sevilla (Spa) 0
Sevilla win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 0
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Vlahovic 45 pen, Chiesa 90+5)
Juventus win 3-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Diaby 3, Adli 81)
Bayer Leverkusen win 4-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Xhaka 19)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Goncalves 62)
3-3 on aggregate after extra-time
Sporting win 5-3 on penalties

Mar 16 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 0
Manchester United (Eng) 1 (Rashford 56)
Manchester United win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 16 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 0
Roma (Ita) 0
Roma win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 7 (Gimenez 9, Kokcu 24, 38 pen, Idrissi 49, 60, Jahanbakhsh 64, Danilo 67)
Shakhtar Donestk (Ukr) 1 (Kelsy 87)
Feyenoord win 8-2 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Manchester United (Eng) v Sevilla (Spa); Juventus (Ita) v Sporting (Por); Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) v Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel); Feyenoord (Ned) v Roma (Ita)

Semi-Final Draw

Juventus (Ita)/Sporting (Por) v Manchester United (Eng)/Sevilla (Spa); Feyenoord (Ned)/Roma (Ita) v Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)/Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel)

2022-23 EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Legs

Mar 7 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 1 (Pedro 18)
AZ (Ned) 2 (Pavlidis 45, Kerkez 62)

Mar 9 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0
West Ham United (Eng) 2 (Antonio 36, 45+2)

Mar 9 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 1 (Barak 69)
Sivasspor (Tur) 0

Mar 9 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 2 (Milic 39, Marchwinski 82)
Djurgardens (Swe) 0

Mar 9 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 2 (Amdouni 6, Zeqiri 40)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2 (Medvedev 17, Abubakari 70)

Mar 9 – Chisinau
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0
Nice (Fra) 1 (Amraoui 45+3)

Mar 9 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 1 (Dreyer 57)
Villarreal (Spa) 1 (Trigueros 28)

Mar 9 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 1 (Orban 35)
Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1 (Okaka 16)

Last 16 – 2nd Legs

Mar 15 – Istanbul
Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1 (Januzaj 88)
Gent (Bel) 4 (Orban 31, 32, 34, Cuypers 37)
Gent win 5-2 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 2 (Karlsson 28, Pavlidis 62)
Lazio (Ita) 1 (Anderson 21)
AZ win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 16 – London
West Ham United (Eng) 4 (Scamacca 21, Bowen 47, 49, Mubama 65)
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0
West Ham United win 6-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Sivas
Sivasspor (Tur) 1 (Yesilyurt 35)
Fiorentina (Ita) 4 (Cabral 44, Milenkovic 62, Goutas 78 og, Castrovilli 89)
Fiorentina win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Stockholm
Djurgardens (Swe) 0
Lech Poznan (Pol) 3 (Marchwinski 77, Kvekveskiri 90+1, Skoras 90+2)
Lech Poznan win 5-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2 (Abubakari 11, Kucka 17)
Basel (Sui) 2 (Calafiori 53, Amdouni 90+3)
4-4 on aggregate after extra-time
Basel win 4-1 on penalties

Mar 16 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 3 (Laborde 30, Moffi 53, Brahimi 79)
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 1 (Tapsoba 54)
Nice win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 0
Anderlecht (Bel) 1 (Slimani 73)
Anderlecht win 2-1 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Lech Poznan (Pol) v Fiorentina (Ita); Gent (Bel) v West Ham United (Eng); AZ (Ned) v Anderlecht (Bel); Basel (Sui) v Nice (Fra)

Semi-Final Draw

Lech Poznan (Pol)/Fiorentina (Ita) v Basel (Sui)/Nice (Fra); Gent (Bel)/West Ham United (Eng) v AZ (Ned)/Anderlecht (Bel)

SOUTH AMERICA

2023 COPA LIBERTADORES

Third Qualifying Stage – 1st Legs

Mar 8 – Rancagua
Magallanes (Chi) 1 (Zapata 90+5)
Independiente Medellin (Ecu) 1 (Batalla 70)

Mar 8 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 1 (Silva 42)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Paulinho 66)

Mar 9 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 0
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0

Mar 9 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Churin 34)

Third Qualifying Stage – 2nd Legs

Mar 15 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Ecu) 2 (Pons 15, 39)
Magallanes (Chi) 0
Independiente Medellin win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 3 (Paulinho 49, 81, Hulk 88)
Millonarios (Col) 1 (Uribe 90+3)
Atletico Mineiro win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Avila 90+7)
Huracan (Arg) 0
Sporting Cristal win 1-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 2 (Carrizo 38, Aquino 62)
Fortaleza (Bra) 1 (Guilherme 90+2)
Cerro Porteno win 3-1 on aggregate

2023 COPA SUDAMERICANA

First Stage

Mar 7 – Rancagua
Audax Italiano (Chi) 3 (Sepulveda 19, Sosa 56, Fuentes 58)
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 2 (Zampedri 16, 36)

Mar 7 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 4 (Alzugaray 7, Angulo 20, Alvarado 78, Caicedo 90+2 og)
Delfin (Ecu) 0

Mar 7 – Asuncion
Tacuary (Par) 2 (Ruiz 27, Paredes 84)
General Caballero JLM (Par) 2 (Garcia 49 og, D. Martinez 68)
Tacuary win 4-2 on penalties

Mar 7 – Maldonado
River Plate (Uru) 0
Penarol (Uru) 4 (Arezo 8, 16 pen, 75, Milans 21)

Mar 7 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 0
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 1 (Hernandez 53)

Mar 8 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Guabira (Bol) 0
Oriente Petrolero (Bol) 1 (Correa 73)

Mar 8 – Medellin
Aguilas Doradas (Col) 1 (Pineda 65)
Santa Fe (Col) 2 (Mosquera 45+4, De La Rosa 83)

Mar 8 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 3 (Santander 45+2, Dorrego 53, Borja 60)
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 1 (B. Caceres 47)

Mar 8 – Lima
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 3 (Olaya 40, Vanegas 74, S. Mena 82 og)
Binacional (Per) 1 (Palacios 1)

Mar 8 – Montevideo
Defensor Sporting (Uru) 0
Danubio (Uru) 0
Danubio win 4-3 on penalties

Mar 8 – Merida
Estudiantes de Merida (Ven) 1 (Paredes 87)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 1 (Chacon 25)
Estudiantes de Merida win 3-1 on penalties

Mar 9 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Blooming (Bol) 6 (Sinisterra 16, 38, 51, G. Rodriguez 45+1, 54, Fenga 80)
Atletico Palmaflor (Bol) 0

Mar 9 – Rancagua
Cobresal (Chi) 0
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Davila 28)

Mar 9 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 1 (J. Hernandez 7)
Junior (Col) 0

Mar 9 – Guayaquil
Emelec (Ecu) 2 (Bolanos 13, 89)
Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu) 1 (Mancinelli 49 pen)

Mar 9 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 2 (Quispe 10, Herrera 70)
Cienciano (Per) 0

AFRICA

2022-23 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Mar 3 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Magema 55 og)
AS Vita (Cod) 0

Mar 11 – Algiers
JS Kabylie (Alg) 2 (Benzaid 63, Nait Salem 86)
AS Vita (Cod) 1 (Tchakei 55)

Mar 11 – Luanda
Atletico Petro (Ang) 0
Wydad (Mar) 2 (Zola 59, Sambou 90)

Mar 18 – Brazzaville
AS Vita (Cod) 0
Wydad (Mar) 0

Mar 18 – Algiers
JS Kabylie (Alg) 1 (Mouaki 90)
Atletico Petro (Ang) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
JS Kabylie (Q)	5	3	1	1	4	2	10
Wydad (Q)	5	3	1	1	4	1	10
Atletico Petro	5	1	1	3	2	5	4
AS Vita	5	1	1	3	3	5	4

Group B

Mar 4 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Sherif 1, Kendouci 40, Khalil 90+2)
Coton Sport (Cmr) 0

Mar 7 – Omdurman
Al Hilal (Sdn) 2 (Abagna 41, Lilepo 83 pen)
Coton Sport (Cmr) 0

Mar 11 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 5 (Allende 4, Zwane 24, Mokoena 40, Shalulile 72, 88)
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Sherif 13, Tau 61)

Mar 17 – Garoua
Coton Sport (Cmr) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 4 (Kahraba 23, 29, 51, Tau 54)

Mar 18 – Omdurman
Al Hilal (Sdn) 1 (Abdelrahman 72)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Mudau 67)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
M. Sundowns (Q)	5	3	2	0	12	6	11
Al Hilal	5	3	1	1	6	3	10
Al Ahly	5	2	1	2	11	8	7
Coton Sport	5	0	0	5	2	14	0

Group C

Mar 7 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 1 (Chama 45+1)
Vipers (Uga) 0

Mar 7 – Conakry
Horoya (Gui) 1 (P. A. N'Diaye 70)
Raja (Mar) 3 (Sabbar 6, 63, Nahiri 42)

Mar 18 – Entebbe
Vipers (Uga) 1 (Lawal 45+3)
Raja (Mar) 1 (Benjdida 18)

Mar 18 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 7 (Chama 10, 36 pen, 70, Othos 32, 65, Kanoute 54, 87)
Horoya (Gui) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Raja (Q)	5	4	1	0	14	2	13
Simba (Q)	5	3	0	2	9	4	9
Horoya	5	1	1	3	2	12	4
Vipers	5	0	2	3	1	8	2

Group D

Mar 7 – Annaba
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Belkhir 35)
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 0

Mar 7 – Alexandria
Zamalek (Egy) 3 (Gaafar 9, Zizo 29, Jaziri 90+1)
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Benayad 57)

Mar 17 – Benghazi
Al Merrikh (Sdn) 1 (Sergio 90 pen)
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Ben Hammouda 23)

Mar 17 – Annaba
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 2 (Draoui 75, Wamba 79)
Zamalek (Egy) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance (Q)	5	3	1	1	6	4	10
CR Belouizdad (Q)	5	3	0	2	4	2	9
Al Merrikh	5	1	2	2	2	3	5
Zamalek	5	1	1	3	3	6	4

- *All CAF Champions League group standings are correct up to the conclusion of matchday five*

2022-23 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Mar 8 – Benghazi
Al Akhdar (Lby) 1 (Boakye 90+1)
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Mwaku 15)

Mar 8 –Johannesburg
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 2 (Nku 7, Koapeng 75)
USM Alger (Alg) 0

Mar 19 – Ndola
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Aubiang 72)
USM Alger (Alg) 1 (Kateregga 90+5 og)

Mar 19 – Benghazi
Al Akhdar (Lby) 4 (Abd Alraheem 31, Papel 50, 66, Makkari 73)
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 1 (Mvelase 61)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
M. Gallants (Q)	5	3	0	2	9	8	9
USM Alger	5	2	2	1	7	4	8
St-Eloi Lupopo	5	1	2	2	4	7	5
Al Akhdar	5	1	2	2	7	8	5

Group B

Mar 8 – Brazzaville
Diables Noirs (Cgo) 0
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 1 (Kouame 59)

Mar 9 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 3 (Acquah 45+2, 56, 90+3)
Motema Pembe (Cod) 1 (Yallet 78)

Mar 19 – Luanda
Motema Pembe (Cod) 1 (Yallet 52)
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 2 (Kouame 27, 90)

Mar 19 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 2 (Nwagua 73, 77)
Diables Noirs (Cgo) 2 (Ampiah 28 og, Bassinga 81)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rivers Utd (Q)	5	3	1	1	9	6	10
ASEC Abidjan (Q)	5	3	1	1	5	4	10
Diables Noirs	5	1	2	2	5	5	5
Motema Pembe	5	0	2	3	2	6	2

Group C

Mar 8 – Cairo
Future (Egy) 2 (Mohsen 10 pen, Essaoubi 50 og)
ASFAR (Mar) 0

Mar 8 – Lome
ASKO Kara (Tog) 1 (Tchoutchoui 66)
Pyramids (Egy) 4 (Ben Youssef 3, Fathi 26, 36, Issa 64)

Mar 19 – Rabat
ASFAR (Mar) 1 (Hammoudan 61)
Pyramids (Egy) 0

Mar 19 – Cairo
Future (Egy) 3 (Elfil 41, Lasheen 72, Atef 87)
ASKO Kara (Tog) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASFAR (Q)	5	3	1	1	10	5	10
Pyramids	5	2	2	1	8	5	8
Future	5	2	2	1	7	4	8
ASKO Kara	5	0	1	4	3	14	1

Group D

Mar 8 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 2 (Mayele 8, Moloko 68)
Real Bamako (Mli) 0

Mar 8 – Tunis
US Monastir (Tun) 1 (Traore 3)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0

Mar 19 – Bamako
Real Bamako (Mli) 2 (Kamissoko 45+2, 61)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1 (Traore 67)

Mar 19 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 2 (Musonda 33, Mayele 59)
US Monastir (Tun) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Young Africans (Q)	5	3	1	1	8	4	10
US Monastir (Q)	5	3	1	1	6	3	10
Real Bamako	5	1	2	2	5	8	5
TP Mazembe	5	1	0	4	5	9	3

- *All CAF Confederation Cup group standings are correct up to the conclusion of matchday five*

ASIA

INDIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mumbai City*	20	14	4	2	54	21	46
Hyderabad*	20	13	3	4	36	16	42
ATK Mohun Bagan**	20	10	4	6	24	17	34
Bengaluru**	20	11	1	8	27	23	34
Kerala Blasters**	20	10	1	9	28	28	31
Odisha**	20	9	3	8	30	32	30
Goa	20	8	3	9	36	35	27
Chennaiyin	20	7	6	7	36	37	27
East Bengal	20	6	1	13	22	38	19
Jamshedpur	20	5	4	11	21	32	19
NorthEast United	20	1	2	17	20	55	5

**Qualify for the championship semi-finals*
***Qualify for the championship play-offs*

Play-Offs

Mar 3 – Bengaluru
Bengaluru 1 (Chhetri 97)
Kerala Blasters 0
After extra-time

Mar 4 – Kolkata
ATK Mohun Bagan 2 (Boumous 36, Petratos 58)
Odisha 0

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Mar 7 – Mumbai
Mumbai City 0
Bengaluru 1 (Chhetri 79)

Mar 9 – Mumbai
Hyderabad 0
ATK Mohun Bagan 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Mar 12 – Bengaluru
Bengaluru 1 (Javi 22)
Mumbai City 2 (Bipin 31, Mehtab 66)
2-2 on aggregate after extra-time
Bengaluru win 9-8 on penalties

Mar 13 – Kolkata
ATK Mohun Bagan 0
Hyderabad 0
0-0 on aggregate after extra-time
ATK Mohun Bagan win 4-3 on penalties

Final

Mar 18 – Goa
ATK Mohun Bagan 2 (Petratos 14 pen, 85 pen)
Bengaluru 2 (Chhetri 45+5 pen, Krishna 78)
After extra-time
ATK Mohun Bagan win 4-3 on penalties
ATK Mohun Bagan: Kaith – Rai, Damjanovic, Kotal, Bose (Nassiri 83); McHugh (Gallego 83), Martins (Hnamte 66); R. Singh, Boumos (Hamill 86, Rathi 108), Kuruniyan (Colaco 54); Petratos.
Bengaluru: G. Singh – Das, Bruno Ramires, Jhingan, Jovanovic (Perez 46), R. Singh (Shirvas 108); Wangjam, Javi (U. Singh 90), Kumar (Alan Costa 102); Krishna, Narayanan (Chhetri 4).

KUWAIT

Regular season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kuwait SC*	18	9	8	1	37	22	35
Kazma*	18	8	5	5	33	27	29
Al Qadsia*	18	8	5	5	30	24	29
Al Arabi*	18	7	7	4	31	22	28
Al Fahaheel*	18	7	3	8	31	31	24
Al Salmiyah*	18	5	8	5	25	22	23
Al Jahra**	18	6	5	7	21	25	23
Al Nasar**	18	5	6	7	30	40	21
Al Tadhamon**	18	4	4	10	19	34	16
Al Sahel**	18	3	5	10	22	31	14

**Qualify for the championship round*
***Qualify for the relegation round*

LEBANON

Regular season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ansar*	11	8	3	0	28	7	27
Shabab Al Sahel*	11	7	4	0	17	5	25
Al Ahed*	11	7	3	1	20	8	24
Al Nejmeh*	11	7	2	2	18	7	23
Bourj*	11	7	2	2	17	11	23
Shabab Al Ghazieh*	11	3	3	5	12	16	12
Safa**	11	2	4	5	8	15	10
Tadamon Sour**	11	2	4	5	11	15	10
Al Akhaa Al Ahli**	11	2	1	8	10	25	7
Salam Zgharta**	11	1	4	6	7	15	7
Al Hikma**	11	2	1	8	9	15	7
Tripoli SC**	11	0	5	6	4	22	5

**Qualify for the championship round*
***Qualify for the relegation round*

- *Teams carry over half of their point tally from the first phase to the championship/relegation round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahed (C)	21	14	6	1	39	11	36
Al Nejmeh	21	13	6	2	34	14	34
Al Ansar*	21	13	6	2	45	16	32
Shabab Al Sahel	21	10	5	6	28	23	23
Bourj	21	9	5	7	25	26	21
Shabab Al Ghazieh	21	3	3	15	16	39	6

**Deducted three points*

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tadamon Sour	21	8	6	7	30	24	25
Tripoli SC	21	5	8	8	19	35	21
Al Hikma	21	6	3	12	18	26	18
Salam Zgharta	21	4	6	11	15	26	15
Safa (R)	21	4	8	9	18	20	15
Al Akhaa Al Ahli (R)	21	4	4	13	20	37	13

PALESTINE (GAZA STRIP)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Khadamat Rafah (C)	22	15	5	2	31	7	50
Shabab Rafah	22	15	4	3	35	16	49
Ittihad Shojaeyya	22	13	5	4	40	22	44
Shabab Jabalia	22	8	6	8	23	23	30
Ittihad Khanyounis	22	6	11	5	30	22	29
Al Sadaka Club	22	6	10	6	23	21	28
Hilal Gaza	22	7	6	9	27	31	27
Ittihad Beit Hanoun	22	6	6	10	20	28	24
Gaza El Riyadi	22	6	5	11	20	27	23
Shabab Khanyounis	22	5	7	10	16	25	22
Khadamat Al Nosirat (R)	22	4	7	11	15	29	19
Shabab Al Zawaida (R)	22	2	6	14	17	45	12

PALESTINE (WEST BANK)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jabal Al Mukaber (C)	22	17	4	1	50	15	55
Hilal Al Quds	22	17	1	4	46	18	52
Shabab Al Khaleel	22	14	5	3	41	12	47
Shabab Al Dhahiriya	22	14	3	5	39	20	45
Markez Balata	22	9	8	5	37	30	35
Thaqafi Tulkarem	22	7	7	8	28	29	28
Taraji Wadi Al Nes	22	5	9	8	31	42	24
Shabab Alsamu	22	7	2	13	29	35	23
Al Birah Institution	22	5	7	10	21	32	22
Ahli Al Khalil	22	5	5	12	27	40	20
Shabab Al Amari (R)	22	3	6	13	18	33	15
Islami Kalkelea (R)	22	0	1	21	10	71	1

CONCACAF

2023 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Round of 16 – 1st Legs

Mar 7 – Santiago
Violette (Hai) 3 (Chery 13, 39, Tarek 47 og)
Austin FC (USA) 0

Mar 7 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 0
Orlando City (USA) 0

Mar 7 – San Salvador
Alianza (Slv) 0
Philadelphia Union (USA) 0

Mar 8 – San Pedro Sula
Olimpia (Hon) 4 (Lopez 10, Benguche 55, 73, Bengtson 61 pen)
Atlas (Mex) 1 (Furch 15 pen)

Mar 8 – Panama City
Tauro (Pan) 0
Leon (Mex) 1 (Moreno 55)

Mar 8 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 5 (Blackmon 21, Raposo 59, Garcia 64 og, Vite 70, White 78)
Real Espana (Hon) 0

Mar 9 – San Pedro Sula
Motagua (Hon) 0
Pachuca (Mex) 0

Mar 9 – Alajuela
Alajuelense (Crc) 0
LAFC (USA) 3 (Bouanga 47, 69, 89)

Round of 16 – 2nd Legs

Mar 14 – Austin
Austin FC (USA) 2 (Driussi 51, 63)
Violette (Hai) 0
Violette win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Guadalajara
Atlas (Mex) 4 (Quinones 38, 90+2, Herrera 63, Rocha 78)
Olimpia (Hon) 0
Atlas win 5-4 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 4 (Lowe 45+1, Gazdag 62 pen, Perea 81, 84)
Alianza (Slv) 0
Philadelphia Union win 4-0 on aggregate

Mar 15 – San Pedro Sula
Real Espana (Hon) 3 (Montes 67, 86, Rocca 75)
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 2 (White 66, Becher 83)
Vancouver Whitecaps win 7-3 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 1 (Vela 83)
Alajuelense (Crc) 2 (Gonzalez 8 pen, Suarez 52)
LAFC win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 15 – Orlando
Orlando City (USA) 1 (Kara 89)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Cordova 21)
1-1 on aggregate. Tigres UANL win on away goals

Mar 16 – Leon
Leon (Mex) 2 (Rubio 26, Hernandez 45+2)
Tauro (Pan) 0
Leon win 3-0 on aggregate

Mar 16 – Pachuca
Pachuca (Mex) 1 (I. Hernandez 73)
Motagua (Hon) 1 (E. Hernandez 89 pen)
1-1 on aggregate. Motagua win on away goals

Quarter-Final Draw

Violette (Hai) v Leon (Mex);
Tigres UANL (Mex) v Motagua (Hon);
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) v LAFC (USA);
Atlas (Mex) v Philadelphia Union (USA)

Semi-Final Draw

Violette (Hai)/Leon (Mex) v Tigres UANL (Mex)/Motagua (Hon); Vancouver Whitecaps (Can)/LAFC (USA) v Atlas (Mex)/Philadelphia Union (USA)

OCEANIA

VANUATU

Group A

Feb 1: Sia-Raga 2-3 Rainbow;
Wings 3-0 Patvuti
Feb 3: Patvuti 3-2 Rainbow;
Sia-Raga 3-2 Wings
Feb 6: Wings 8-4 Rainbow;
Patvuti 0-10 Sia-Raga

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sia-Raga (Q)	3	2	0	1	15	5	6
Wings (Q)	3	2	0	1	13	7	6
Rainbow	3	1	0	2	9	13	3
Patvuti	3	1	0	2	3	15	3

Group B

Feb 2: Police 0-1 Arato;
Eraniau 0-4 Ifira Black Bird
Feb 4: Arato 2-0 Eraniau;
Police 1-7 Ifira Black Bird
Feb 7: Ifira Black Bird 6-0 Arato;
Police 1-3 Eraniau

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ifira Black Bird (Q)	3	3	0	0	17	1	9
Arato (Q)	3	2	0	1	3	6	6
Eraniau	3	1	0	2	3	7	3
Police	3	0	0	3	2	11	0

Semi-Finals

Feb 9: Sia-Raga 8-2 Arato;
Ifira Black Bird 2-1 Wings

Third Place Play-Off

Feb 11: Arato 0-6 Wings

Final

Feb 11: Ifira Black Bird 1-0 Sia-Raga

2023 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Preliminary Group Qualifiers

Feb 18 – Apia
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 1 (Saghabi 9 pen)
Veitongo (Tga) 0

Feb 18 – Apia
Ilaoa & To'omata (Asa) 0
Lupe ole Soaga (Sam) 13 (Taualai 14, Toni 25, 37, Tumua Leo 35, 44, 49, 67, 85, Bolton-Roberts 52, Mason 71, Matau 73, Tumua 82, 89)

Feb 21 – Apia
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 8 (McCoy 13, 43, Porter 22, Saghabi 32, 39, Harmon 36 pen, Tiputoa 87, Tuakana 88)
Ilaoa & To'omata (Asa) 0

Feb 21 – Apia
Lupe ole Soaga (Sam) 9 (Cunniff 15, 40, Setefano 20, Taualai 45+1 pen, 66 pen, Tumua Leo 63, Letutusa 70, Alatina Talilai 80, Fehoko 86 og)
Veitongo (Tga) 0

Feb 24 – Apia
Veitongo (Tga) -
Ilaoa & To'omata (Asa) -
Match cancelled due to the threat of a cyclone

Feb 24 – Apia
Lupe ole Soaga (Sam) 7 (Cunniff 23, 89, Alatina Talilai 55, Mason 63, Letutusa 79, Tumua Leo 81, Matau 90)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 1 (Trego 87)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lupe ole Soaga*	3	3	0	0	29	1	9
T. Maraerenga	3	2	0	1	10	7	6
Veitongo	2	0	0	2	0	10	0
Ilaoa & To'omata	2	0	0	2	0	21	0

**Group winners Lupe ole Soaga qualify for the 2023 OFC Champions League group stage*

National Play-Off Qualifiers

Fiji

Feb 23 – Suva
Suva 1 (A. Soromon 62)
Rewa 1 (Nabenia 90+4)

Feb 26 – Suva
Rewa 1 (Verevou 90+3)
Suva 2 (Tahioa 49, Matanisiga 80 og)
Suva win 3-2 on aggregate

New Caledonia

Feb 11 – Noumea
Hienghene Sport 1 (Sansot 12)
Tiga Sport 3 (J. Bearune 5, Welepane 18, D. Bearune 61)

Feb 18 – Noumea
Tiga Sport 2 (Mathelon 15, Welepane 26)
Hienghene Sport 0
Tiga Sport win 5-1 on aggregate

New Zealand

Mar 11 – Wellington
Wellington Olympic 1 (Stevens 37)
Auckland City 1 (Gray 79)

Mar 18 – Auckland
Auckland City 5 (Gillion 23, Tade 74, 77 pen, 87 pen, Kilkolly 85)
Wellington Olympic 3 (Mata 15, Watson 28, 62)
Auckland City win 6-4 on aggregate

Papua New Guinea

Feb 11 – Lae
Hekari United 2 (Joe 50, Naime 60)
Lae City 1 (Morgan 45+5)

Feb 18 – Port Moresby
Lae City 0
Hekari United 2 (Yasasa 88, Joe 90+4)
Hekari United win 4-1 on aggregate

Solomon Islands

Feb 22 – Honiara
Kossa 1 (Feni 43)
Solomon Warriors 1 (Gagame 54)

Feb 28 – Honiara
Solomon Warriors 2 (Ifunaoa 33, Mala 60)
Kossa 1 (Bakale 17)
Solomon Warriors win 3-2 on aggregate

Tahiti

Feb 17 – Pirae
Dragon 0
Pirae 2 (Labaste 49, Paama 79)

Feb 24 – Pirae
Pirae 7 (Tetauira 13, 40, 66, Bourebare 16, Tihoni 50, Ngiamba 78, Mathon 86)
Dragon 3 (Tinirauarii 73 pen, 78, Chan Kat 90+7)
Pirae win 9-3 on aggregate

Vanuatu

Feb 22 – Port Vila
Sia-Raga 0
Ifira Black Bird 3 (Iawak 55, Lency 64, Kalotang 78)

Feb 25 – Luganville
Ifira Black Bird 1 (Tenene 2)
Sia-Raga 0
Ifira Black Bird win 4-0 on aggregate

- *The seven national play-off winners qualify for the 2023 OFC Champions League group stage*

May 2023 *Vol. 63 No. 9*

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Jens Lehmann

Manchester United 0 Arsenal 0

2003, Premier League, Old Trafford

Of all the games that defined Arsenal's 2003-04 "Invincibles" campaign – the Gunners' last Premier League title-winning season – goalkeeper Jens Lehmann looks back on the clash that came closest to undoing their incredible unbeaten run...

Crucial... Lehmann at Old Trafford

"People knew at the time that what we achieved was special, but it seems even more incredible when you look at what has happened since: we have seen some great Premier League teams over the past 20 years yet none of them have gone through a season without losing a game.

Manchester United had some great teams with Sir Alex Ferguson. Then you see Jose Mourinho's Chelsea and now Liverpool with Jurgen Klopp and Manchester City with Pep Guardiola. They have all won lots of trophies and played some incredible football, but none of them went through a whole season unbeaten. This shows that our achievement in the 2003-04 season was something special. At the time maybe we didn't realise how much of a success that was. Since then everyone has tried to do it, but they have come up short.

When I look back at that season now some games stand out, and the matches against Manchester United were so important at that time. They were our big rivals, the team that we had to finish in front of, and the game at Old Trafford that season showed me what English football was all about. It was the first really tense game I had after joining Arsenal that summer and it was a very rough game in the box.

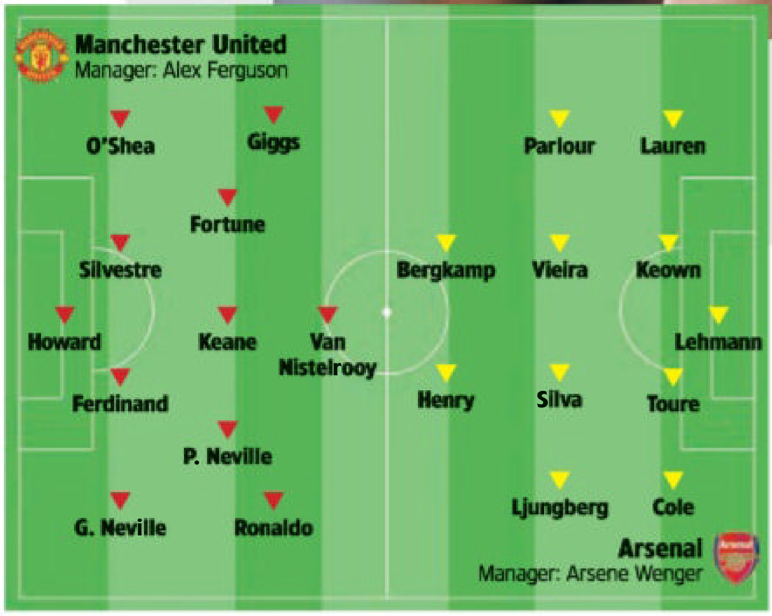
In Germany, the referees protected goalkeepers, but we had people pushing and punching and jumping at each other. I remember I called home after the match and said how crazy it was.

This was the game that finished with Ruud van Nistelrooy missing a penalty and Martin Keown screaming at him. Then a few days later, loads of us were suspended and fined. That showed me what the Premier League was all about. If Van Nistelrooy had scored the penalty that day, our unbeaten season would never have happened, and I remember that the pressure increased as we reached the end of the season.

We were always confident of winning the title, but the game at home to Liverpool near the end is one that I always remember. We went behind two times and you could feel the crowd at Highbury wanting this desperately. This was the moment when people were talking about the unbeaten season and how important it would be. It added some pressure, for sure. Once we came back to win that game 4-2, it felt like a hurdle was taken away.

The big disappointment for that team was the defeat against Chelsea in the Champions League. We were good enough to win that competition, but it just didn't happen. That tie went against us at key moments and, looking back now, that team could have won more."

Interview by Kevin Palmer at a BT Sport event



Controversial ...Martin Keown celebrates after Van Nistelrooy's penalty miss

> "If [Ruud] van Nistelrooy had scored the penalty that day, our unbeaten season would never have happened"

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